




Sports experiences as anticipatory socialization: How does communication in sports help individuals with intellectual disabilities learn about and adapt to work?

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ABSTRACT

Organizational socialization scholarship has demonstrated that various sources and experiences shape people's expectations and understanding of work. Yet we understand less about how activities outside of school and work teach us about employment. Thus, the current study explored how sports communication outside of work helps socialize adults to work. We focused on individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID), a population that has lacked scholarly attention. Interviews and observations of working Special Olympics athletes illuminated how sports communication socialized individuals by helping athletes learn valuable skills used at work, adapt to various job duties, and develop confident work identities. This study showcases the unique role of sports communication in the process of anticipatory socialization, highlights sports activities as another way individuals engage in identity construction, and extends established research on sports and disability by demonstrating how sports skills percolate into work.

KEYWORDS

Organizational communication; sports communication; sports and disability; anticipatory socialization; individuals with intellectual disabilities

Sports play a monumental role in our society. Overlooking the pervasive activity of sports on contemporary culture would involve ignoring one of the most significant aspects of humankind. In efforts to be inclusive of the crucial role of sports in society, scholars have taken interest in studying sports communication, noting that “communication functions to constitute and give meaning to the experience of sport” (Kassing et al., 2004, p. 357).

A subarea of sports communication research has focused more narrowly on sports and disability. Scholars have approached the subarea of sports and disability from a variety of perspectives. For example, Buysse and Borchering (2010) analyzed photographs from 12 print newspapers during the 2008 Paralympic Games, demonstrating how the media ignores and symbolically hides athletes with disabilities. In an experiment, Von Sikorski, Schierl, Möller, and Oberhäuser (2012) investigated framing effects (whether participants could see spectators in a photograph of a Paralympic athlete) on people's attitudes of physically disabled athletes. Other scholars have used rhetorical methods to study the Paralympics and Olympic Games' mascots, showing that mediated versions of the two mascots (named “Mandeville” and “Wenlock,” respectively) offered different portrayals of

injury/disability, isolated specific athletes, and demonstrated unequal athletic capabilities (Butler & Bissell, 2015).

Although these studies of sports and disability have expanded our understanding of these phenomena, several gaps in this literature remain. First, many have noted that most of this work has focused narrowly on popular media. Thus, authors have encouraged future work to explore other sites to understand sports and disability from various lenses (Butterworth & Kassing, 2015; Cherney, Lindemann, & Hardin, 2015). To address this defect, we draw on organizational communication scholarship to understand the relationship between sports, disability, and employment.

Second, most of the sports and disability research centers around physical disabilities, focusing only on the body. For instance, much attention has been given to Paralympic athletes rather than Special Olympics athletes. Here, we seek to extend the sports and disability literature by focusing on intellectual rather than physical differences.

Third, authors have encouraged future sports and disability studies to “push beyond analyses that reveal stereotypes of athletes with disabilities . . . recommend[ing] more work that is focused at the intersection of identities, that greater attention be paid to areas beyond the playing field” (Butterworth & Kassing, 2015, p. 5). To answer this call, we explore the intersection of sports, disability, and work identities. In particular, we seek to understand what communication in sports teaches people about communication in the workplace. How does sports communication help individuals with intellectual disabilities adapt to employment? To frame this question, we begin by reviewing literature in organizational communication that explains how people traditionally learn about work.

Learning about work: anticipatory socialization

People learn about work through communication, in a process recognized as “organizational socialization” (Jablin, 2001). Socialization refers to the process of joining, participating in, and leaving organizations (Kramer, 2010). Although not all organizational members experience socialization in a rigid linear process (Kramer, 2011b; Kramer & Miller, 2014), Jablin’s (2001) model helps us understand the various phases of socialization, which include 1) anticipatory socialization (learning about and considering organizational membership), 2) encounter (joining organizations and experiencing new membership), 3) metamorphosis (assimilating and no longer feeling like a newcomer) and 4) exit (leaving organizations).

Throughout anticipatory socialization, people “form expectations about careers, jobs, and organizations prior to entering them” (Jablin, 2001, p. 262). Research investigating this initial socialization phase has suggested that prospective employees, particularly young people, learn a great deal from their education, family members, friends, media, as well as previous organizational experiences, like part-

time work, internships, and volunteering (Buzzanell, Berkelaar, & Kisselburgh, 2011; Dailey, 2016; Herrygers & Wieland, 2017; Jahn & Myers, 2015; Lucas, 2011). For example, Myers, Jahn, Gailliard, and Stoltzfus (2011) demonstrated how adolescents are exposed to various vocations through their parents' experiences, like one participant whose parents both worked as medical professionals. The authors also found that students' passion and performance in school classes (e.g., math) or hands-on activities (e.g., science labs) influenced career choices. Other research, like Levine and Hoffner's (2006) study of 64 high schoolers' conceptions of work, has emphasized the importance of part-time work in the anticipatory socialization process. Through such employment, participants talked about learning various responsibilities, interpersonal skills, and both positive and negative aspects of work. Furthermore, internships help teach prospective full-time employees about organizations and vocations (Dailey, 2016). Scholars have also noted how the job interview process shapes prospective members' perceptions of person-organization fit – the extent to which individuals fit the organization's culture (Jablin, 2001; Kramer, 2010; Miller & Buzzanell, 1996).

In sum, we know that various experiences shape people's expectations and understanding of work. Yet we understand less about how activities – particularly those *outside* of school and work – teach people about organizations and roles. This is primarily important, as Kramer (2010) noted the significance of voluntary organizational experiences in the socialization process. In explaining how volunteering serves as a source of anticipatory socialization, Kramer (2010) discusses that “learning to work cooperatively in scouts or being encouraged to ‘give it all’ for the team [helps] individuals acquire the attitudes and efforts that are expected of them” (p. 33). Despite this acknowledgment, empirical research has been slow to follow. Kramer's work on membership in a community choir has shown that previous and concurrent organizational experiences (e.g., singing in other choirs) helped socialize new members to their choral role (Kramer, 2011a, 2011b; Meisenbach & Kramer, 2014), but to our knowledge, there is little evidence supporting how voluntary experiences (e.g., singing in other choirs) socializes workers for paid employment (e.g., collaborating with cross-functional teams).

Furthermore, because research has focused primarily on adolescents' anticipatory socialization, we have much to learn about how *adults* learn about and adapt to employment. To fill these two gaps in the literature, we explore how sports experiences outside of school and work help socialize adults to employment. We begin by discussing the general benefits of sports experiences.

General benefits of sports experiences

Beyond the physical benefits of exercise, sports shape people's identity and character (Danish, Petitpas, & Hale, 1993). Through sports experiences, we learn crucial values that transcend sports, such as self-confidence, setting goals, and leadership skills. For example, Kremer-Sadlik and Kim's (2007)

naturalistic data illustrated how both formal (organized) and informal (leisurely) sports activities influenced children's attitudes and values, such as setting and achieving goals. Sports may also contribute to a variety of life skills that are applicable to other settings, including time management, organization, patience, self-control, commitment, flexibility, acceptance of other people's beliefs, risk taking, and the ability to discern and follow a critical decision-making process (Danish et al., 1993).

Although most research focuses on the benefits of sports experiences among youth, scholars have also explored the positive effects of sports experiences in adulthood. For instance, participants have reported that engaging in marine sports evokes feelings of happiness, pleasure, and escape, which increases life satisfaction (Hoon & Ho, 2015). Wojno's (2013) qualitative study of a running club that brings together the homeless and the housed revealed how sports can create bridges between varying social classes and change people's perceptions of disparate populations. Because of the well documented relationship between exercise and mental health, sports are often prescribed as part of treatment plans. In one study, people with mental health problems who had participated in exercise as part of their treatment reported "feelings of accomplishment and well-being, self-esteem, mentally positive and alert, increased energy, less listlessness, and improved mood" (Crone & Guy, 2008, pp. 203–204). Former heroin users also reported that engaging in sports exercises increased their physical and mental well-being, reduced depression, and curtailed stress levels (Neale, Nettleton, & Pickering, 2012). Despite these known benefits of sports experiences, few studies have explored how sports activities help people learn about and adapt to work.

Sports experiences as anticipatory socialization

Although scholars understand little about how sports inform our understanding of work, research alludes to the fact that sports experiences are likely helpful in cultivating our work identities. For example, using biodata, Kniffin, Wansink, and Shimizu (2015) found that former high school athletes demonstrated higher levels of leadership, self-confidence, and self-respect later in life. Other work has shown a positive correlation between subjective physical health and job satisfaction (Faragher, Cass, & Cooper, 2005).

Furthermore, scholarship in the area of workplace health promotion has explored the effects of sports experiences within the workplace. Defined by the CDC (2017) as the "use of effective workplace programs and policies [that] can reduce health risks and improve the quality of life for American workers," workplace health promotion encompasses organizational efforts such as physical exercise classes, fitness and nutrition assessment and training, employee assistance programs, and health information screening and education (Geist-Martin, Horsley, & Farrell, 2003; Zoller, 2003). Research in this area has

focused on how organizational wellness programs save employers money by reducing absenteeism (Parks & Steelman, 2008) and influence individual and group behaviors (Brinkley, McDermott, & Munir, 2017). Specifically, engaging in workplace wellness initiatives has been shown to boost physical activity (Conn, Hafdahl, Cooper, Brown, & Lusk, 2009), increase work productivity (Kuoppala, Lamminpää, & Husman, 2008), and improve individuals' work relationships (Scherrer, Sheridan, Sibson, Ryan, & Henley, 2010). Critical research has also considered the ethics of WHP, acknowledging that such programs ultimately benefit organizations, not employees (Zoller, 2003).

Although the workplace health promotion literature describes how wellness initiatives may influence specific organizational behaviors, it does not a) account for sports activities *outside* of work and b) explain how sports experiences can shape our general understanding of work. Participating in sports outside of work is likely to serve as a source of anticipatory socialization. Yet we understand little about how athletic involvement outside work may socialize individuals to vocations and organizations.

To fill this gap in the literature, we focus on the sports and work experiences of individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID). The American Association of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (2017) characterizes a person as having an ID if he or she has significant limitations in both (a) intellectual functioning, meaning that people with ID generally score below 75 on an IQ test, and (b) limited adaptive behavior, meaning that people with ID generally struggle with everyday conceptual (e.g., language), social (e.g., interpersonal), and practical (e.g., personal care) skills.

We chose to study this unique population for at least three reasons. First, people with ID likely experience less anticipatory socialization from other sources, making sports experiences a crucial method of learning about employment. Historically, people with ID have lived on the periphery of society, receiving education in segregated classrooms, rarely interacting with peers without disabilities, and being offered few employment opportunities in the community. Although society has become more inclusive of people with ID, these individuals still likely receive fewer vocational and organizational messages about work from their peers, family, and education programs than people without disabilities.

Second, concentrating on individuals with ID and Special Olympics athletes in particular affords us the unique opportunity to understand how sports experiences outside of school and work help socialize adults to employment, because over one third of Special Olympics athletes are at least 22 years-old (McDowell, Jacobs, & Siperstein, 2016). Whereas 80% of American adults do not meet the CDC's recommended amount of exercise (Harris et al., 2013), by studying individuals with ID who play organized sports throughout their lives, we can better understand adults' socialization experiences.

Third, we focus on individuals with ID to contribute to the literature seeking to understand the work experiences of individuals with ID, which is

“extremely scarce” (Ellenkamp, Brouwers, Embregts, Joosen, & Weeghel, 2016, p. 56). Below, we summarize this area of research and the need to understand how sports activities help develop individuals with ID for employment.

Work experiences of individuals with intellectual disabilities

Although there is limited research on the work experiences of individuals with ID, several studies have examined factors associated with working people with ID. First, research has shown that certain personal factors are related to people with ID’s employment experiences. As Siperstein, Heyman, and Stokes (2014) review, characteristics like IQ, behavior, and age are all associated with positive employment outcomes. Second, research has found that work environment-related factors shape work participation. Ellenkamp et al.’s (2016) recent meta-analysis reviewed 26 articles and identified four work environment-related factors that led to individuals with ID obtaining or maintaining work, including 1) employers’ decisions and opinions, 2) job content and performance, 3) workplace interaction and culture, and 4) job coaches. Third, studies have demonstrated that experiential factors influence whether or not individuals with ID are employed. For example, previous work, school, and vocational rehabilitation experiences (Moore, Harley, & Gamble, 2004) help predict employment. In sum, scholars know that personal, work-related, and experiential factors all play a role in the employment experiences of individuals with ID.

Yet, we have little understanding of many other factors that people with ID experience and how those factors may affect employment. Specifically, nearly three million individuals with ID participate in sports experiences through Special Olympics programs in over 180 countries across the world (Harada, Siperstein, Parker, & Lenox, 2011). Most people commonly recognize the physical and psychological value of sports experiences, and a handful of studies have empirically investigated the effects of sports experiences for individuals with ID. For example, Harada and Siperstein (2009) documented the motives individuals with ID and their families reported for participating in Special Olympics – for fun (54%), friendship (21%), and achievement (13%) among other reasons. Harada et al. (2011) also argue that Special Olympics also promotes social inclusion for people with ID through sports. However, research has yet to demonstrate the effect of sports experiences on employment outcomes, like obtaining a job, learning specific skills and roles at work, and excelling in employment.

Therefore, this study seeks to understand how communication during Special Olympics serves as a form of anticipatory socialization for individuals with ID. As scholars have noted, sports communities are enacted through communication (Black, 2019), and “communication is not only fundamental, but arguably constitutive to the experience of sport” (Kassing et al., 2004, p. 358). Cranmer and Myers (2017) have also

demonstrated that some of the communicative mechanisms through which student-athletes adjust to their collegiate athletic teams parallels the organizational anticipatory socialization literature. To this end, our research question asks: How does communication in sports socialize individuals with ID to employment?

Method

Participants

This U.S.-based study was approved by IRB, and individuals had to meet a number of requirements to be eligible for participation. First, participants must have been a Special Olympics athlete, meaning they had been deemed by Special Olympics to have an intellectual disability. According to the DSM-5, an intellectual disability (i.e., intellectual disability disorder), is a disorder “onset during the development period that includes both intellectual and adaptive functioning deficits in conceptual, social, and practical domains.” Second, participants must have been at least 18 years old. Third, participants must have been employed at least part-time in a competitive setting. In contrast to a sheltered setting, individuals with ID who work in competitive work environment “work in the community alongside co-workers without disabilities, and they earn at least minimum wage” (Siperstein et al., 2014, p. 166). Fourth, each athlete must have had a guardian willing participate in the interview portion of the study alongside the athlete.

Special Olympics helped provide access to employed athletes for this study. Participants were recruited through several steps. First, we attended an aquatics competition to recruit employed athletes and their guardians. Second, two specific Special Olympics coaches forwarded an e-mail to their teams to request that employed athletes join the study. Third, we used a list from the region’s Special Olympics Program Coordinator to e-mail employed athletes’ guardians directly to solicit participation. Fourth, the first author contacted a living community for individuals with ID where she had volunteered, asking the volunteer coordinator for help recruiting Special Olympics athletes in the living community.

In total, 7 females and 12 males participated in the study. Athletes’ average age was 31 years old ($SD = 10.34$), and most participants were Caucasian (63%), Hispanic (26%), and Persian (5%). Athletes worked in a variety of competitive settings, including retail (e.g., grocery stores, thrift stores, bowling alley, etc.), restaurants (e.g., dine-in restaurants, fast-food), and nonprofits (e.g., hospitals, academic settings). Participants represented a number of different sports, including aquatics, basketball, track & field, soccer, softball, football, golf, gymnastics, kayaking, cycling, tennis, bocce, power lifting, and ice skating. For all but two participants, we also learned when participants

began competing in Special Olympics. On average, athletes began when they were 16 years old, although this number ranged from 8 to 31 ($SD = 7.98$).

Data collection

To understand how sports communication socialized individuals with ID, we conducted interviews with Special Olympics athletes. Per IRB guidelines, athletes' guardians also attended the interviews. Although we did not specifically ask guardians any questions, they sat alongside athletes and often interjected. Usually, guardians elaborated or filled in information that athletes either superficially or incompletely described. For example, when we asked if Michael had competed in other Special Olympics sports beyond swimming, he shared three additional sports he played: bowling, basketball, and soccer. After a pause, his mother chimed in: "Didn't you do another sport last year, too?" Sure enough, Michael had forgotten about his participation in football. In addition, guardians sometimes helped clarify questions, like when Janet's guardian re-stated, "No, she [the interviewer] said, 'how long have you been in Special Olympics?'" We never had a sense that guardians were telling a different story than athletes; rather, their participation helped elicit information and facilitate conversation. Thus, we included their quotations in our data. Guardians were most often members of the athlete's family. Specifically, mothers ($n = 9$), fathers ($n = 3$), one grandmother, and both parents ($n = 2$) participated in the interviews. In two instances, two athletes were interviewed simultaneously (Clint and Henry; Lizzy and Audrey) at a living community for individuals with ID. In those cases, two staff from the living community, who spend a great deal of time with their residents, served as guardians for the athletes.

Interviews were conducted in locations that the athlete and guardian chose, such as a coffee shop or restaurant, aside from one interview, which was conducted via videoconference. Interviews lasted between 17 and 60 minutes (41 min, on average) and were audio-recorded with participants' consent. In speaking with participants, we asked questions about each athlete's involvement in sports, their job search, job duties, their communication at work, and how they learned the skills they used at work. Although initial questions were broad in nature, follow-up questions focused specifically on participants' involvement with Special Olympics (e.g., "How did you learn the skills you use in your job? Has Special Olympics helped teach you any of these skills?"). All interviews followed the same general guide of questions, many of which were informed by the socialization and identification literature. To protect confidentiality, athletes chose pseudonyms, and we assigned pseudonyms to other participants. Interviews were transcribed, resulting in 373 pages of single-spaced text.

In addition to speaking with athletes, we also observed 13 athletes working for approximately 1 hour each. These observations were unobtrusive, meaning that each researcher acted like a "fly on the wall," writing field notes to

document the employed athlete's work, including the skills used in their role, interactions with managers and coworkers, and customer contact. In total, we wrote 92 single-spaced pages of field notes.

Data analysis

Our team analyzed data using a phonetic iterative process (Tracy, 2020). After conducting a handful of interviews and observations, we met to discuss several main themes that emerged from the data that answered the project's main research goals as well as existing theory and research. Although some of our data alluded to other sources of socialization – like how parents taught participants about work – and additional benefits of sports – including mental health and physical wellness – we ignored portions of the data that did not specifically answer our research question, which focused on the role of communication in sports in learning and adapting to work. Through collective data immersion, we engaged in primary-cycle coding, assigning chunks of text to initial descriptive and in vivo categories using the constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). During this process, we developed a codebook of relevant themes. Furthermore, we collapsed and combined themes to create second level analytic codes that summarized multiple primary-cycle codes. In our results section below, we italicized these secondary-cycle or axial codes for readers. This process involved integrating and making connections among categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Next, we collected more data, refining our codebook throughout subsequent data collection and immersion. Finally, we engaged in selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), seeking to collapse secondary-cycle codes into core categories that answered our research question. This resulted in three overarching themes explaining how sports communication socialized individuals with ID by helping athletes a) learn valuable skills used at work, b) adapt to various job duties, and c) develop confident work identities.

Results

Learning valuable skills used at work

Our results showed that sports communication helped individuals with ID learn about and adapt to employment in various ways. First, through sports experiences, athletes learned valuable skills used at work. For example, employed athletes most often reported their *ability to follow instructions* as a skill they learned from Special Olympics that helped socialize them to work. Participants talked about having to listen to managers and coworkers, just like their coaches. For instance, Timmy talked about taking directions from his manager at the Peruvian restaurant where he worked and equated that

communication with having to “listen to coaches” in the seven (yes, seven!) sports he played through Special Olympics.

In addition, participants reported learning *teamwork* through their sports experiences, which came in handy at work. Even in seemingly individualistic sports, like aquatics, we noticed athletes working together and cooperating to achieve team goals. Janet, who competed on both swim and equestrian teams, explained, “I have to make sure we do well as a team . . . it’s more of an impact as a group because we always want to go do better and make sure that we’re always helping everyone out.” At work, athletes mimicked this sports communication in collaborating with colleagues. When discussing skills used during her housekeeping job at a fitness gym, for example, Janet referred back to the importance of teamwork, noting that she would go help fold towels if her coworkers needed help. Thor’s father also saw the “team spirit” his son brought to work from the field. “He just wants to help,” Thor’s dad boasted.

Athletes also learned *time management* skills through their communication in Special Olympics, which they applied to work. Through sports experiences, individuals with ID learned to be on schedule for practices and events, dressed in uniform with their gear, ready to perform. Similarly, in their jobs, employees had to arrive on time, often dressed in uniform with a nametag, ready to work. When asked about attending practice, for example, Michael said that he could “never” be late. Michael’s mom shared how good Michael was at time keeping because he was accustomed to following a sports schedule. She admitted, “if I’m not awake when it’s getting close for time to him to go to work, he will come get me and say, ‘Hey, it’s time!’”

Furthermore, competing in Special Olympics taught athletes to *focus* and be disciplined – another skill that work required. In sharing her experience playing bocce, Belle compared work to the concentration required in her sport, which involves careful attention to a small ball, called the pallina: “It’s just like getting off and on the field. You have to pay attention to the . . . pallina . . . and that applies in work.” Train also talked about needing to concentrate when bagging groceries, so he could identify which items to categorize together: “It’s that sorting process that you gotta know how to stay focused on, so you can know how to bag well.” Athletes clearly translated sports communication that emphasized concentration and attention to their work.

Involvement in sports also taught participants the *value of hard work*, both on and off the field. Athletes used phrases like “No pain, no gain” and to “never give up” as skills they learned through sports experiences that applied to their job. Thor’s father summarized how his son’s involvement in Special Olympics cultivated the dedication and commitment he has to work:

He doesn’t miss practices. He doesn’t miss work . . . Whenever you become a part of a team, you have to go to practices, you can’t just show up for the games and have the fun without the

work . . . And that's one of the things they really like at the golf course [where he's employed]. They value that if Thor says he's gonna be there, he's gonna be there.

Lastly, the *social awareness* athletes honed through Special Olympics was applicable to their work. Participants talked about how they became comfortable interacting with others through sports (e.g., encouraging others, being a good teammate, and not “talking garbage” about their competitors), which translated to how they treated and socialized with colleagues at work. Sports taught Henry about, “getting along with others and being competitive, you know, doing really good in bringing home those little round medals,” which helped him be a better employee. Aurora also added, “With work and Special Olympics, both, you have to learn how to interact with all kinds of different kind of people and deal with some people that may be having a bad day or cranky.”

Adapting to various job duties

Sports communication also helped individuals with ID adapt to various job duties. In our analysis, job skills (the previous theme) encompassed characteristics of the worker, whereas job duties encompassed characteristics of the job. Through interviewing and observing individuals, we saw how athletes' sports experiences helped them learn about and adapt to *multiple responsibilities* they had at work. Throughout their work shift, participants completed many different job tasks. For example, we observed Thor “sweep the cart barn . . . hose down all of the carts, dry them off, and stack them all nice and neat inside the cart barn.” Being involved in Special Olympics helped participants learn how to handle work with multiple responsibilities, because many athletes competed in multiple sports, or were involved in multiple activities within the same sport (e.g., competing in both freestyle and butterfly events of a swim meet). For example, Aaron played several sports, including bowling, cycling, basketball, and swimming. Clint competed in basketball, softball, football, and volleyball. These experiences “on the field” so to speak translated to participants' work lives, allowing them to juggle different duties at work. Some athletes even worked multiple jobs, like Michael, who worked at a restaurant and RV park.

Playing sports also helped socialize individuals with ID to various job duties, because all athletes' employment involved *physical work*. Every participant had a job that required physical activity, such as standing, walking, or lifting things. Wendy, for example, described that she was required to “roll up the silverware . . . clear dirty dishes . . . bus all the tables . . . clean the café counter, and . . . clean all the front and the back table” for her job. All the tasks we observed involved athletes using their bodies (e.g., washing, stacking, hanging, scrubbing) as opposed to sedentary work at a computer or desk. Thus, the physical nature of Special Olympics helped adults with ID stay active and fit for their work. Aurora

remarked that playing sports “helped me keep my health in check and be more healthy [*sic*].” In addition, communication in sports offered participants the ability to understand the physical abilities and limits of their bodies.

Furthermore, we found that most athletes completed *routinized work*. We watched most participants perform the same tasks over and over, like Celeste, who worked alone in a university biology lab, sorting petri dishes into plastic bins and replacing them with the same number of clean petri dishes. Diahella hung shirts on clothes hangers during his shift at a thrift store. Because of the repetitive nature of much of their work, we saw several athletes who had lists of the same duties they always completed. Our analysis also revealed that participants learned about and adapted to routinized tasks, in part, through sports communication. For example, many athletes discussed the importance of practice and repeated actions in sports to achieve results. Their sports schedules were also standardized, which helped them adapt to routines at work.

Interestingly, not all sports experiences helped individuals with ID adapt to various job duties. Namely, we found that athletes completed fairly *independent tasks* at work. We observed that participants worked alongside other coworkers in “teams,” but their tasks were not dependent on others. Consistently, we watched participants, like Aaron who bussed tables at a taco joint, work mostly by themselves without much communication with others. This type of work contrasted the communication practices participants experienced in Special Olympics, where they depended on team members to play their sports, like basketball, soccer, or football. In fact, when asked why they competed in Special Olympics, participants most commonly answered because they enjoyed being on a team and making friends. Belle gushed, “My favorite part is watching the teams come. When they call the teams up, and you can just feel the spirit . . . the awesomeness or the camaraderie.” Indeed, we observed this aura of camaraderie at the aquatics event we attended. Despite many athletes swimming individual races, we saw a unique atmosphere of support, fellowship, and esprit de corps. Whereas athletes were taught to collaborate, communicate, and work together during their sports activities, their employers assigned independent work and job tasks that required little to no cooperation with coworkers. As a result, a handful of participants reported disliking the autonomous nature of their work, and some boasted about opportunities to interact with colleagues and customers. Although his solitary duties involved cleaning tables and lockers at a bowling alley, Charlie’s favorite part of his job was “smiling, greeting the customers too, and holding the doors for them.”

Developing confident work identities

Finally, communication in sports helped individuals with ID develop confident work identities. Our analysis showed that participation in Special Olympics strengthened athletes’ *self-esteem*, which helped them be more self-assured in their identity as an employee. Colby and Wendy specifically mentioned feeling

“more confident.” Tony’s grandmother observed that “Special Olympics . . . gave him confidence in him, you know, and he feels like he can try things that maybe he wouldn’t have tried before.” Whereas many individuals with ID traditionally would not have the self-esteem to take on a new role, try different tasks at work, or help others on the job, our participants expressed confidence in these areas of employment, in part, because of their sports experiences and successes.

This was illustrated beautifully as we observed Charlie, wearing a green staff t-shirt from the bowling alley where he worked, along with two medals around his neck that he had won at a Special Olympics swim meet the previous weekend. At one point, while cleaning tables, Charlie paused to look at his medals, touch them, and return to work. Our observations further proved that athletes were proud of their work, including Thor, who joyfully took us on a tour of the golf course he cleaned and bragged about finding unconsumed beers in golf carts. Similarly, while he was washing dishes at the restaurant where he worked, Michael paused to show off a picture he had taken of chips he had fried to perfection.

In addition, we found that sports communication fostered a *willingness to ask questions* that helped participants thrive at work. Participants learned this open style of communication, in part, through Special Olympics involvement. For example, when our team attended an aquatics competition to recruit employed athletes, we observed athletes freely asking questions of their coaches and teammates. Similarly, athletes felt comfortable openly communicating in this way at work. In his job at a restaurant, Timmy explained how he had to “work on my own” but also seek help when needed, like times he had to “get one of the tall guys to get me some sauce up there. [Laughs.] I’m too short.” Henry also relied on his coworkers: “I get along with my staff members at my work very well, and if I need help with something heavy I can always [ask.]” In watching Titi stock items at a pharmacy store chain, we observed Titi asking her supervisor questions, like where to place a certain skincare product. In short, participants seemed comfortable approaching others with specific concerns or needs because they had learned, in part, to do so through sports activities.

Lastly, Special Olympics cultivated *bravery* in participants that enabled athletes to develop grit in their work roles. Wendy specifically mentioned feeling “brave” as a skill she learned through her athletic involvement, which helped her thrive in the multiple jobs she held. Whereas many participants or their parent expressed how individuals with ID struggle with change, communication in sports taught athletes that it was okay to fail, but that they should be brave in their attempts – both on and off the field. We heard this phrase, which is part of the Special Olympics motto, consistently throughout our interviews. Gabriel’s mom summarized:

I think people who can appreciate and can join in and benefit from Special Olympics have a good start toward learning skills in a workplace. So, I think someone who has been

a consistent athlete know about all the things it takes to, we were saying about, wearing a uniform, showing up on time, being cooperative and friendly. And you remember the Special Olympics pledge, “Let me win, but if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt?” So being brave in the attempt transfers to coming to work every day and putting yourself out there saying, “I’ve gotta a job, I’m gonna do it the best I can. I’m gonna be brave and show up.”

Through sports, people with ID found the courage to give it all they had. As a competitor, bravery might involve swimming across an Olympic-sized pool, sprinting to second base, or traveling to another state for a competition. These experiences, along with the Special Olympics motto, cultivated courage in participants to try new things at work. Take Aurora, who became promoted from cleaner to cashier. She recalled:

The interesting thing about my job is I did not start out at cashier at all. I started out as a lobby person. Which was mopping and sweeping . . . everyone else I know that has a disability in fast food does that. So . . . and stocking condiments, and mopping, and sweeping and stuff for . . . I’m telling a good 6 months to a year that’s all I did before they allowed me to move up to cashier . . . I felt really proud of myself, because not a lot of people with disabilities are able to do cashier.

In sum, experiences in Special Olympics helped our participants learn about and adapt to work in unique ways that other anticipatory socialization sources, like family, education or peers, might not have afforded. In the following section, we elaborate on the contributions of these findings.

Discussion

Through interviews with Special Olympics participants, this study uncovered how communication in sports socialized individuals with ID by helping athletes a) learn valuable skills used at work, b) adapt to various job duties, and c) develop confident work identities. These findings extend our understanding of organizational socialization, identity at work, and sports and disability.

To begin, this study showcases the unique role of sports communication in the process of anticipatory socialization, the process of learning about and adapting to roles and organizations before joining them. To date, research has focused primarily on how prospective members learn about vocations and organizations through family, education, peers, media, and previous organizational experiences (Jablin, 2001; Kramer, 2010). However, our understanding of the voluntary experiences through which people learn about work has been fairly limited. Studies that had explored voluntary organizational experiences had only studied their influence on subsequent volunteer roles (Kramer, 2011a, 2011b; Meisenbach & Kramer, 2014). This project uniquely shows how adults’ voluntary experiences outside of work also cultivate individuals’ job skills, prepare employees for various job duties, and foster work identities. Also, whereas prior studies have focused on how educational and volunteer experiences prepare

individuals for specific jobs (e.g., engineering, Leonardi, Jackson, & Diwan, 2009) or organizations (e.g., a community choir, Kramer, 2011a, 2011b), our findings reveal a much broader benefit of communication in sports. Specifically, athletic experiences help prepare individuals for employment by developing general skills, like teamwork and time management, that are useful in most occupations and organizations. Furthermore, the job duties that athletes learn, such as juggling multiple responsibilities and conducting routinized work, may be applicable to a range of future work opportunities. Lastly, sports communication armored participants with the confidence needed to enter employment and embrace work identities.

In addition, the current project contributes to scholarship by investigating identity in a novel realm – through sports communication outside of work. Our analysis highlights sports activities as another way individuals engage in *identity construction*, defined by Wieland (2010) as “the ongoing communicative process by which individuals develop a sense of whom they are – their self-identity – in relation to the world around them” (p. 505). Identity construction is an ongoing social process, where individuals craft a sense of self through organizational discourse (Kuhn, 2006). Previous research in this area, however, has attended primarily to employee discourses *within* the organization as a source of identity construction (Herrygers & Wieland, 2017; Meisenbach, 2008; Wieland, 2010). Similar to research on volunteers’ identities (Meisenbach & Kramer, 2014), this study provides new insight into how experiences outside of employment shape workers’ constructions of identity.

Finally, our findings speak to the research on sports and disability. In their review of the scholarship on sports and disability, Cherney et al. (2015) organize research around three themes: 1) disability, sports and rehab discourse; 2) disability metaphors and stereotypes and sports, public controversy; and 3) disability law. Specifically, disability, sports, and rehab studies focus on two dialectical tensions: inclusivity-competition and safety-stigma. When persons with disabilities meet for a competition, they get excited to make new friends and interact with each other (Lindemann & Cherney, 2008). The feeling of inclusivity is one major reason special athletes remain involved in sports because it improves overall well-being (Cherney et al., 2015; Seymour, Reid, & Bloom, 2009). Studies on this dialectic adopt a medical framework to examine disability rather than taking a communication perspective (Cherney et al., 2015). In terms of stigma, studies examine safety issues and prevention of sports injury because athletes with disabilities are more likely to reject safety measures because accepting these safety standards portrays athletes with disability sports as lesser than athletes without disabilities (Lindemann & Cherney, 2008, 2014). Therefore, Cherney et al. (2015) call for communication scholarship to expand already established knowledge and scrutinize in depth “the complicated relationship of disability, sport and ableism” (p. 13). They argue that research on people with disabilities should investigate how sports provides self-confidence and eradicate

discrimination, which in turn, can inspire other people with disabilities to join the sports community and advocate disability rights.

This present study extends established research on sports and disability by demonstrating how sports skills spread into work life. In our study, athletes learned valuable skills such as teamwork, discipline, and hard work that translated to skills needed in organizations. Other studies have noted several positive outcomes of sports participation on health and social skills (e.g., Danish et al., 1993), and our study extends this research by understanding how communication in sports translates to the workplace. Thus, our research expands the way scholars look at sports and disability, not only as a positive health outcome but as a communicative phenomenon that can enhance work.

Furthermore, this research advocates for disability rights by ameliorating stereotypical views of disabled athletes' capabilities (Cherney et al., 2015). Our results show that athletes with disabilities adapt to various job duties and develop confident work identities. In fact, this study shows that athletes are able to adapt to work situations and deal with uncertainty, which contradicts commonly held stereotypes of people with ID. In this way, the current study demonstrates how sports communication can serve as a tool for individuals with disabilities to push stereotypical boundaries. Scholars should begin to examine more communicative behaviors of athletes with disabilities and how their behaviors in other contexts (e.g., relationships, technology use), might defy other stereotypes.

Practical applications

In addition to contributing to research in the areas of organizational socialization, identity at work, and sports and disability, the current project also holds practical implications for managers, organizational leaders, trainers, as well as coworkers of individuals with ID. For managers and organizational leaders, our findings show that individuals with ID who have played sports are well-equipped for the workforce. Typically, people with ID are less likely to be employed in inclusive work settings than individuals with other disabilities (Olney & Kennedy, 2001) and do not receive as favorable of employability rankings compared to other disability types (Kocman, Fischer, & Weber, 2018). However, the current study suggests that sports experiences might help level the playing field, so to speak, helping individuals with ID succeed in employment.

Based on our findings, individuals who are responsible for training new employees with ID should consider incorporating sports analogies (e.g., the manager as your coach) or analogous terms (e.g., teamwork) for workers with sports experiences. This might allow individuals with ID see the bridge between their sports and work experiences, and it should help socialize new employees more effectively.

Lastly, we hope this research offers helpful takeaways for parents, guardians, and friends of individuals with ID. Because “many athletes do not recognize that many

of the skills they have acquired to excel in sport are transferable to other life areas” (Danish et al., 1993, p. 368), it is important that individuals close to individuals with ID encourage athletes to seek and maintain employment. Parents, guardians, and friends can help individuals with ID apply what they have learned through sports to the workforce and encourage athletes’ work identities.

Limitations and future directions

Similar to most qualitative studies, the findings of this study cannot be generalized. Also, although we intended for this study to explore adults’ socialization, only six of our participants began Special Olympics after age 18; thus, some of the sports communication reported herein as a source of anticipatory socialization likely began before adulthood. Still, we contend that participants’ continued involvement in sports as adults helped athletes learn about and adapt to work. In addition, this study focuses specifically on the work and sports experiences of Special Olympic athletes, which is only one avenue for individuals with ID to participate in sports. Future work should explore individuals with ID who engage in sports outside of Special Olympics (e.g., people might play pickup basketball with friends, lift weights with a personal trainer, or go jogging by themselves), who may have similar or contrasting work experiences. Finally, additional research could examine how sports communication outside of work helps socialize individuals with other disabilities and non-disabled people to organizations and vocations.

Conclusion

This study demonstrated that communication in sports helped socialize Special Olympics athletes to work. Our data provide valuable insight into the way sports activities outside of work help individuals with ID learn about and adapt to employment. These findings demonstrate the importance of sports communication beyond the playing field, and we encourage continued exploration to better understand the impact of everyday athletic experiences.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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