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## RESEARCH

# Pitching Perspectives on Disability: Voyage Experiences of Disabled Sailors on Tall Ships

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This paper explores the experiences of disabled sailors on board a tall sailing ship, adapted for accessibility. Eight disabled sailors kept audio diaries and created artwork during the voyages, as well as taking part in interviews afterwards. In reporting their accounts, we explored what it meant for participants to go to sea. We became particularly interested in embodied activities on board ship, the ways in which sailing created and highlighted new identities, and the social aspects of sailing in a team. Our account brings together some of the central concerns in Disability Studies with the perspectives of social practice theorists, and seeks to add layers of meaning to both approaches. Since this is a nautical project, the paper is structured by following the stages of going to sea, and in the words of one participant, we seek to ‘join the dots between medical, academic and anecdotal knowledge’.

**Keywords:** Disability-studies; embodiment; socio-medical; sailing; identity; social-practices

The aim of this paper is to reflect on the embodied experiences of disabled sailors on voyages aboard an adapted sailing ship, with a view to understanding better the ways in which adjustments to social practices such as sailing can affect their sense of identity as it is played out in their day-to-day lives. Disabled people are often excluded from such ‘risky’ ventures as tall-ship sailing; however, the material in this article stems from a project in which the sailing environment was significantly adapted to include disabled sailors. In that context, this is a rare opportunity to reflect on how disabled people might experience their own bodies in contact with the objects, the social environment and the tasks with which they engage as sailors.

In setting out to write this article, we draw significantly both on Disability Studies (DS) theories about disabling factors in society, and on social practice theories (Schatzki 2001; Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012), with the goal of showing how those two areas of scholarship fruitfully interconnect (Williams et al., 2015; Titchkosky, 2011). Disability Studies scholars (Finkelstein, 1998; Oliver and Barnes, 2012; Goodley, 2011) are united in opposing a deficit model of disability, instead seeking to explore ideas about wider cultural, political and social factors that create disability. However, a person is not just disabled in a realist sense by an oppressive society which fails to include them (Davis 1995), but may experience their own impairment in a fluid way that shifts with the fine grain of interactional detail (Williams, 2011), everyday life and social relations (Thomas, 2003). Titchkosky (2011) defines disability as a ‘space of interpretive encounter’ (p. 56), showing how the phenomenon itself is shaped and re-interpreted through material and social experiences.

Disability Studies has troubled notions of what disability is, but that account has often been left at the generic, non-embodied level of theory. In order to develop more nuanced accounts which reflect the complexity of disabled people’s lived experience, we draw on the ideas of Garland-Thomson (2011, 594), who offers the notion of ‘misfitting’ as a way to imagine disability as arising from and residing in material arrangements. She is particularly interested in: ‘how the particularities of embodiment interact with their environment in its broadest sense, to include both its spatial and temporal aspects’. (Garland-Thomson, 2011, 592). Garland-Thomson’s influential notions draw on the ideas of social practice theorists, whose focus is on the ways in which social practices themselves are constituted and re-created by human actors (Reckwitz 2002). Shove, Pantzar et al. (2012) for instance suggest that we can understand how ‘doings’ in the social world become what they are by virtue of the material resources used within them, as well as the skills of the social actors who perform particular practices. In other words, when we do something in the world, we draw on pre-existing patterns of action, but at the same time, we transform a social practice as we reproduce it (Riniken, Jals and Shove 2015, 878). As these authors comment, in their study of domestic arrangements for heating the home, we can

catch a glimpse in participants' diaries of how objects are significant in shaping the decisions of the participants. Their actions are set within particular configurations of practices, which are continually shifting and re-developing. These ideas have started to resonate for disability theorists such as Titchkosky (2008, 2011), Abrams (2016) and Garland-Thomson (2011), where the interest is in how a disabled person encounters the world, specifically a world that may not be shaped with their own particular bodies in mind. The point here is that materiality is a product of the interpretations, meanings and interactions of human beings, and it is through those actions that the 'material' elements (in this case, voyaging on a ship) take on a meaning.

Social practices are seldom neutral in terms of their significance and cultural value in particular societies. For instance, Blue, Shove et al. (2016) apply the insights of social practice theories in the field of public health. Their focus is on smoking, and the way in which it can be realised as a practice, how it is enacted over space and time. As these authors point out, a social practice cannot fully be understood without recourse to its social significance, in the case of smoking in so far as it has been understood 'as a normal and socially acceptable thing to do, variously associated with relaxation, sociability, masculinity, glamour and toughness' (42). Thus in unsettling the taken-for-granted assumptions about their social actions, human beings can display the ways in which they experience the value and significance of certain practices, which may convey ideas about who they are, how they are seen in society and what they wish to achieve in the world. As is explored in this paper, the experience of going to sea is not just about how particular material arrangements on board ship are used and put into practice; it is also about the feelings, meaning and the wider significance of the practice, the 'call of the sea'.

Phenomenological accounts of disability further give space for the agency of the disabled social actor, as in Titchkosky's (2008) account of her actions to secure accessible toilet spaces in her university. Robillard provides a moving account of the micro-exclusions he experienced routinely when he acquired motor neurone disease, with an acute awareness of how his own contributions matter; by 'protesting vigorously' when treated as incompetent, his communicative actions can affect the ongoing, sequential interaction (Robillard, cited p. 6 Antelius, 2009).

Instead of focusing on exclusionary practices, which might constitute disabling barriers, the current paper thus seeks to understand how a deliberately adapted practice might be experienced by the very social actors for whom it has been adapted. As Giddens (1988) argued, social change is deeply and inevitably linked with the 'alterations in the character of day-to-day social practices' (279), and so in pursuing these accounts of sailing, we are chiefly interested in the perspectives of the disabled sailors, their own accounts of the practice of 'adapted sailing' and what all this meant for the ways in which they experienced disability and impairment.

## Methodology

The Jubilee Sailing Trust (J.S.T.) is a charity which offers tall-ship voyages to sailors with and without physical disability. The *Tenacious* and *Lord Nelson* travel to a variety of destinations varying in distance and length of voyage, and on every voyage, disabled sailors benefit from a variety of specific adaptations in order to ensure that they can be maximally independent and active on board ship. In 2010–12, second-year medical students at the University of Bristol were offered the optional educational experience of undertaking a voyage of 5–7 days in one-one partnerships with disabled people on a tall-ship.

This venture provided the opportunity to undertake a qualitative study, which aimed to capture and understand the experience of those who went to sea. The experiences of the medical students were discussed and theorized in an educational journal (Thompson et al., 2016). The current paper by contrast focuses directly on the accounts of disabled sailors on two voyages in 2013. For each of these two voyages, four disabled sailors and four medical students took part in the research. Of the eight disabled sailors, for three, this was their first voyage on the (J.S.T.) but the majority of the other five sailors had travelled with this organization more than once. All of the medical students were novices to the J.S.T., and mostly to sailing also. In the main, the disabled sailors had sensory and physical impairments, although many had more than one impairment. Hidden or non-visible disabilities are always present in any group and two of the medical students also self-defined as 'disabled'.

The research sought to understand the detail of practical, as well as emotional, responses to the voyage. For instance Rinkinen et al's 2015 study of object relations in accounts of everyday life is rich with 'the multiple, dynamic and co-existing roles of things within and beyond matters of practicality and use' (872). We therefore set out to capture rich reflective accounts, which would form the basis for understanding the phenomenon of sailing from the point of view of individual sailors (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). We decided to use a variety of data collection methods to gather emerging plus retrospective perspectives. All the sailors were provided with audio-diaries, journals and art materials, and subsequently took part in interviews. The eight sailors with disability gave full permission to be involved in the research prior to their voyage and also volunteered for post-voyage interviews with one of the authors, seven by phone and one face-to-face.

There were ethical sensitivities that had to be observed, in ensuring the disabled sailors gave voluntary consent to be included in this research, and they were offered full confidentiality and anonymity. Full ethical approval was obtained for the study via the University of Bristol Ethics Committee. Data were also collected from the medical students, via audio diaries and journals, which they kept on board ship, and 'memoirs' which they produced afterwards as reflective

accounts. The findings reported below emerge from a phenomenological analysis (Smith et al., 2009); we aim to understand better the perspectives of all the disabled sailors, including the two medical students who identified as disabled, and so the analysis which follows reflects both on their individual and relational experiences of going to sea.

### **The Call of the Sea: meanings associated with sailing**

There is an imaginary and historical dimension to the pull of the sea. The practice of sailing is associated traditionally with a sense of romantic detachment from real life, something that takes you away from the everyday. In our data people articulated some of these ideas very eloquently. For instance, Jenny<sup>1</sup> describes how she was captivated by the sight of the tall ship *Tenacious* – ‘as soon I saw her moored in Portsmouth harbour ... I knew I was doing the right thing – she is such a beautiful ship’. (audio-diary). Going to sea has always been associated with an ‘in-between’ or liminal micro-world. It would seem that this liminal space offered a much-treasured break from the routines and complexities of daily lives. The crews’ collaborative venture in bringing the ship to port by sail alone was frequently noted with a sense of great satisfaction – ‘a sail full of wind is really magical – against a blue sky – even better ...’ (Noel, interview). The loss of a sense of time, days of the week and the unpredictability of the maritime environment surfaced throughout the data.

Meanings associated with the sea are complex and multi-layered; however, a central feature of the ‘sea’ as a category is that it is a dangerous and overpowering force of nature, which entails challenge and hard work, a risky business from which disabled people might ordinarily be ‘protected’. Roger observed:

It is a very good thing to get out and undergo stressful, mildly dangerous, sometimes pretty dangerous, situations, to realise that actually you can deal with it ... I’m absolutely, totally in love and also in awe of the sea. It’s incredibly powerful, it may look beautiful, but if you’re careless about it – it will grab you. (interview).

Many of the sailors observed how the visceral experience of sailing with the *J.S.T.* directly connected them to maritime history – ‘We live on an island. We shouldn’t lose touch with our roots, and the sea is the root’ (Roger, interview).

### **Riding the Waves: an adapted environment experienced as embodiment**

What a social practice means to those who carry it out is closely related to their own direct, embodied experience of the specific ‘enactment’ of that practice. As Reckwitz (2002) explains, ‘forms of bodily activities ... states of emotion and motivational knowledge’ all come together in particular contexts, in this case – the actual experience of sailing on a particular voyage. Ironically in this instance a very historic, original vessel has been the focus for adaptations which point the way forward with regard to the interaction between impairment, disability and context. There is always a balance to be struck between a successful experience, and one that might be discomfiting, as Freund (2001) suggests, in his analysis of the material arrangements of transport in relation to disabled people. In our study, the data provided insights into how the individual sailors interacted with the particular environment of the *Tenacious* and the *Lord Nelson* which have been extensively re-modeled to facilitate a diversity of physical impairments.

Amongst the many adaptations there are lifts between decks, hoists in sleeping quarters and bathrooms, a hearing loop, braille and raised symbols, guidance tracks and fixed points for wheelchairs in rough weather. The ships are equipped with a speaking compass on the helm and power-assisted steering and the ropes have leather strips, which indicate how much has been hauled or slacked. It was noticeable in the data however that removing barriers for some inevitably imposes barriers for others, due to the specific profiles of different disabled people (Shakespeare 2004); for example, adaptations meeting the needs of sailors with particular visual impairments at times impacted on the mobility of sailors in wheelchairs on deck. There were contrasting embodied responses to the designated ‘social’ areas and adaptations on the vessel. For some of the voyagers in wheelchairs mobility and spontaneity were inevitably compounded in the cramped spaces such as the ship bar. The internal lifts, whilst an essential component of inclusive sailing gave rise to frustrations on occasion – John recalled:

I hate depending on people, so when you are stuck in an elevator and you have to yell for someone to help you ... for someone like me, it’s tough... (interview).

Any social practice which takes place in a particular physical environment will interact with the individual embodied differences of a person’s body, whether disabled or non-disabled. This interaction was an interesting theme in the accounts of sailing: Joe articulated his carefully navigated tightrope between limits and gains in interview:

My body moves completely differently, it takes a while to get into the rhythm of the ship. The first few days I have to watch my footing quite a lot ... it is quite hard – if the deck is wet – I have to concentrate going up the steps

<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms, and some details are altered to preserve anonymity.

... I have to get the angle right ... I like the challenge. I find it interesting to see what I can do and what I can't. (interview).

The embodied experience of difference could also be masked in the context of the sailing when activities took place jointly, performed by the crew as a whole. Further, embodied experience can and does shift during the voyage. Eve recalled how the experience was initially dis-orientating and isolating. Yet within a few days, she had dispensed with her cane and initiated blindfolded explorations – sharing insights around sailing without full vision as a multi-sensory engagement. The relationship between the maritime environment and embodied differences can also be perceived to be extremely beneficial within this group context. Jenny recorded in her diary that the proximity of the hand-rails and 'arms to hold onto' provided her with the option of walking on deck without her 'third leg' (stick) – an impossibility in both her domestic and work spaces ashore. (interview).

The tides and unpredictable weather also challenged the ships' adaptations and brought further layers of judgement and practicalities into play. Returning from an off-ship meal, the tide had dropped to such an extent the decision was made to winch voyagers in wheelchairs back on board – a source of acute embarrassment to one of the returning sailors. Patrick also recalled an infamously rough night when the seas were so high that the permanent crew, resources already stretched, feared they could not guarantee his safety and reluctantly requested he went below-deck when he would have much preferred to weather the storm. In adapting to this nautical environment, the disabled sailors displayed hard-won abilities to hold a complex range of emotions simultaneously, where pride and shame often materialized together. (Chandler 2010).

People in this study suggested frequently that a key factor in signing up for each new voyage was simply the wish to sail again with the J.S.T. However, returning voyagers with deteriorating conditions at times acutely experienced a sense of diminishing possibilities to physically contribute on the voyage – one of the disabled crew frankly expressed his frustration at 'seeing others do things you no longer can'. Noel's second visit to the Lord Nelson was in celebration of his fiftieth birthday. His experience as a J.S.T. sailor ten years previously, was however markedly different. He recalled 'then, I could still walk a short distance ... I could get myself washed and showered, whereas this time I was reliant on my carers ... I really felt my independence fall ... 'relying on somebody else to push me around, to do everything for me ... it was quite hard.' (interview).

Thus when a social practice like sailing is enacted, individual embodied differences are always important, but in this particular context of the adapted sailing ship, the experience of misfitting and fitting (Garland-Thomson 2011) involved risks and gains which fitted with the aspirations of the disabled sailors. However, the wider context of the sea could also pose challenges, which reduced disabled sailors back into a degree of dependency, and this could be compounded by deteriorations in the actual impairments they experienced.

### **Walking the Plank: the dilemmas of building competence**

One could argue that setting up conditions which invite people with impairments to test their physical abilities may engender predominantly negative experiences. However, social practices like sailing can provide a context to develop a range of physical abilities, and also to challenge people to achieve more. The debates prompted by the Paralympics are relevant here, where problematic aspects of physical challenge and normalcy are raised (Peers 2009, Wedgwood 2014). Undoubtedly sailing with the J.S.T. voyages courts the risk not only of becoming a 'super-crip' (Wedgwood 2014, 137) but also of failing to become a totally independent sailor. It is the unenviable remit of experienced permanent crew to manage complex safety issues – at times undermining individual aspirations. John harboured ambitions to climb the mast solo. After securing both metal 'climbing legs' he was invited to negotiate several steps from the deck to the bridge unaided, watched carefully by the captain. It was then decided that an assisted climb was a more appropriate option. John later reflected that he may not set himself up for disappointment so readily on the remainder of the voyage. Being constantly under surveillance in order to classify as 'suitable' (Avner 2013) is perhaps familiar territory for disabled people, however, as the voyage continued, opportunities arose for everyone to extend initial perceptions of limitations. Eve, also a J.S.T. novice, found herself issuing instructions to her absent guide-dog into thin air on arrival. Yet within a few days, she had dispensed with her cane and noted with regret that she did not have the opportunity to climb the mast as often as the sailors without physical disability. Frustrated by times when the ship was 'just toodling along' she said she would have preferred 'more **sailing** ... more **doing!**' (interview).

Disability scholars have sometimes pulled back from individual accounts of 'heroism' in which the disabled body is valued for its superhuman qualities (Schell and Duncan 1999). However, it is true that disabled people who go to sea regularly might well be doing so in order to prove to themselves and perhaps others they can cope as well as anyone else-or as was evident – often better. As John said: 'It's a pretty cool thing to do'. (audio-diary).

### **All Pulling Together: the jointness of the practice of sailing**

Despite this perspective on difference and individual achievement, one of the motivations and gains from taking part in sailing was blending in and being part of a team. Reckwitz (2002) describes a social practice as involving interconnected elements of bodily and mental activities, objects/materials and socially shared competencies, knowledge and skills. The J.S.T. has skilfully constructed an inclusive sailing environment where the opportunity to develop 'an authentic,

functioning team' is highly prized by the disabled sailors from the outset – 'getting into the rhythm of the ship ... not just being an observer ... but part of the show.' (Roger, interview), 'getting **anywhere** on sail, and everyone working together – when we get there, I have this great sense of achievement.' (Joe, interview).

Returning to the notion of intersecting competencies, resources and meanings the J.S.T has facilitated an inclusive practice of sailing which perhaps moves some way towards Freund's (2001) suggestion that in hospitable contexts we shift from a focus on individual bodies towards 'the social body'. Distinctions between dependence and independence, individual identity and collectivity were often blurred and nuanced in the data. Joe, at ease with hands-on teamwork in the practices of sailing, nevertheless suggested in interview that a mechanism to help put on his duvet cover without assistance would be appreciated.

The medical students also shared experiences of disability following their voyage – not necessarily revealed during their time on-ship. Observations reveal perspective-shifting attitudes to their own embodiment and agency: 'My greatest gain was an improvement in my knee; the uneven surfaces and exercise were akin to a week of physiotherapy ... surrounded by people with severe disability put my injury into context and encouraged me to throw myself into all activities possible- the trip seemed to combat my 'mal-adaption' and 'catastrophization' that had almost halted my recovery.' (memoir).

Another student noted how being able to engage fully in sailing and share a berth without revealing their impairment was a prime concern initially, yet later acknowledged that the voyage had provided an invaluable opportunity to consider the integration of his disability in everyday life. There are many reasons why this student's disability was concealed however we could speculate that the binary nature of able/disabled within clinical cultures is not a contributing factor. Perceived medical objectification of disabled people continues to be challenged and re-positioning the body as a source of complex knowledges positively challenges divisive categorisation. (Pols 2011, Hoogsteyns and van der Horst 2013).

### **Life Before the Mast: The human body and non-human materials**

As we have seen, the data shared from the sailors present examples where the body is being felt/seen by itself in its individuality and complexity within particular practices: John, a J.S.T. novice, quickly fell in to the rhythm of choreographed competencies entailed in sailing a tall-ship – embracing the rope-work with such verve he was repeatedly requested to slow down. An ex medical orderly, John was very knowledgeable about how his physiology was adapting to a double above the knee amputation, leading at times to an unenviable tension regarding degrees of involvement:

You have to be really aware of your body and how it is reacting to every situation .... and then to slow down. Which I don't do well at all. I just hammer through like an idiot, and keep trying to do as much as I can, and then consequences fall where they may ... I climbed the mast, and that was probably a mistake. I did that on the Dieppe landing, and I did it to prove to myself. But I really overdid it, and then struggling through the city became a bit of a pain in the arse. (interview).

As with many disabled sailors from the outset of the voyage John acquainted himself with an unfamiliar manual chair that limited his habitual range of movements. The sheer effort of negotiating the inevitable listing of the ship's deck on the open seas was a challenge to navigate. However, whilst fully engaged in the active practice of sailing, it would seem that the sheets, bracings, ropes and steering mechanism became extensions of John's body which responded to the elements, pulled the vessel across the seas, altered course and brought the crews to dock – perhaps off-setting his calculated reduction in independence and mobility. Drawing on the work of Barad (2003), Dale and Latham suggest that there is an inevitable, inseparable 'entanglement' between human embodiment and non-human materialities (2015). This sensitive calibration in terms of individual intention and technologies is highlighted by Winance (2006) who suggests that the wheelchair is no longer 'a device to move' anymore but provides a highly nuanced mediator between intent and action.

The terrain off-ship was also not without challenges to unfamiliar wheelchair users. John shared the indignity of being plummeted out of his chair by an encounter with a pothole following a lively offshore gathering. Angela also noted in her journal 'my heart sinks when it is decided to go to the beach, hopeless for people with wheelchairs'. Nevertheless the overwhelming message in the data was that enduring short-term losses were perceived not so much as a sacrifice, but as a game-changer – providing entry into welcomed new forms of embodiment which accommodated vulnerability and strength, visibility and invisibility within the spatial and temporal aspect of sailing.

In terms of social practice analysis, it is possible to identify an infrastructure on the J.S.T. which supports a myriad of interconnected, inclusive, combinations of materialities and unique embodiments simultaneously throughout the vessel. These practices include mutually constructed roles essential to supporting the sailing community such as preparing food, and cleaning the ship, where participation is an unequivocal requirement. Angela wrote 'I enjoy mess duty because it gives me the chance to serve others and be expected to do so' and Jenny recalled '... washing many plates, cups and cutlery in enormous buckets in the sink, **Very** hot work ... the banter in the kitchen is great! – it made up for the piles of washing up – which I did – as I could lean on the sink ...' (journal) The social and the material literally come together.

In some senses, the actual experience of going to sea created a heightened sense of the body at a sensory and kinaesthetic level. Not only is skin and muscle reported as altered by routine sailing practices 'I feel the ache of my labour, the soreness on my palms' but on a more holistic level, 'the sea, the sky, the stars, the feel of the air in my lungs – no pollution ... it makes me feel alive!'. (Patrick, interview).

The 'materials' of sailing also have a vitality in themselves, resisting and making diverse bodily demands. Divisions between 'active' and 'passive' (Cooper 2013) also became more highly nuanced. Perhaps focused, bodily attunement, is an ingredient in the lure of returning to a practice that demands constant negotiation of kinaesthetic and sensory feedback – 'the sun on your face, the wind racing past you' (memoir).

Joe mused:

I have **quite** an appreciation of the sea ... I watch it going up and down, and I like certain bits of the sea – the bit when it just breaks the ship's front, – I did drawings of the sea and different ships going by. (interview).

### Land-legs (or wheels)/master identity as sailor: shifting between practices

Finally, drawing on journal, audio-diary and interview data we look in detail at one of the voyager's experiences, and also explore how life on a tall ship impacts on her life ashore.

Jenny, a twin, was confronted with issues around comparative normalcy from an early age. She suggests her customary experience is being regarded as 'unable', not an 'active doer' (Loja et al., 2013) because of 'not fitting into the norm'. The J.S.T. voyages appear to play a pivotal role in challenging others' limiting perceptions and bringing to the fore the complex intertwining of multiple identities within disability.

I think I'm much more adventurous than my twin. Because I sit behind a desk all day and hardly move, I like to do something when I get up and go out on holiday, and just have a really good time. It's completely different from anything that my sisters do for their summer holiday.

Jenny recalled showing family around the vessel – her sister exclaimed '– they actually let you loose to sail it? ... You've steered this ship and Jenny – you don't drive!' 'She was just amazed ... I do talk about it a lot, ... especially when I've just come back from a trip'.

On the Tenacious Jenny finds an equilibrium not possible 'on dry land' and walks the decks without a mobility aid. Consequently, she finds herself negotiating a further layer of identity issues. With her disability is rendered invisible, Jenny has to actively negotiate to be fully involved in sailing. 'I do find it very hard when I have to get from 'a' to 'b' when the ship is rolling – by the time I have got to where I need to be – the job has started and I am a spare part ...' This identity challenge brought contesting narratives into play – previously – 'I seem to spend my whole life proving I can actually do something' and as a sailor – 'I don't have a big red arrow over my head reading **'disabled'**'!

Jenny's description of her office-based work pattern is at odds with the multi-dimensional affects she documents at sea: 'lying in your bunk ... you can hear the water just sloshing in your ears .... I tend to get a nice sort of massage from the movement of the ship – the water's just the other side – and I'm just sloshing about in it!' A sense of shared maritime history permeates Jenny's voyage data as she muses on the time-line of the vessel, the ports visited and repeating sea passages across the centuries. Jenny observed that back at home, the 'J.S.T. factor' lasts for some time ... – both in terms of maintaining increased mobility and 'high spirits'. Kissow (2013) questions the assumption that experience and competence achieved by people with physical disabilities in leisure pursuits may be transferrable in other contexts of daily life. Sailing with the J.S.T. has inspired Jenny to travel independently by both train and aircraft.

From our sample it would seem that the J.S.T. experience makes tangible the potential transferability of skills, personal resources, and meanings in individual sailor's land-based lives. This emerges in a number of the interviews where following their initial association with the J.S.T., a number of the sailors subsequently joined organized leisure pursuits, and developed new interests.

The data from the disabled sailors places a premium on seeking adventure, 'achieving something that you thought was impossible' – affirming the place of desire, hope and imagination often absent in leisure opportunities available to people living with disability where choices operate on a deficit model. (Linton 1998). The impact of the voyages also manifests in more subtle aspects: 'My confidence goes up, **really** goes up when I come back. Even if I don't talk to people much ... I listen. There's people on board whose confidence is so high ... I absorb their confidence.' Noel now attends to a weekly art class and captured a 'magical' moment on the seas shortly after his return home; 'I look at my painting **every day**, I love it...' Joe aims to learn how to navigate a vessel by the stars. (interviews).

For some voyagers however, leaving the J.S.T. highlights the tension between freedoms and confidence gained at sea and a return to one's disabled body and persona on land.

Once you get off the J.S.T. you are going to be looked upon as a separate person ... people can tell you are disabled so will tread carefully and of course on board ship we will wind each other up, disabled/able-bodied it doesn't matter, we basically live alongside one another ... it is never going to be the same in the outside world as it is on board the ship. (Kim, audio-tape).

## Discussion: Discovering the New World

As we have observed, the adapted vessel and participatory rhythm of life on the tall-ships often rendered individual impairments invisible – deck, mess duties and the less favoured maintenance and cleaning, forged an albeit contingent melting pot where at times disability was of little relevance. This matrix of inclusive practices contrasted with the everyday experience of many of the disabled sailors who suggested that their lives on land were often structured by society's limited perceptions around disability. Therefore, it has to be said that the overarching finding from this study of adapted sailing was that it was a positive, life-affirming and enabling experience from the point of view of disabled sailors. It was particularly interesting for us that an enabling environment can influence the ways in which sailors experienced their own bodies. Thus the outer context of the adapted social environment interconnects with the embodied experience of disability, challenging us to connect some of the threads in disability theory (Thomas 2004). Freund's (2001) notion of altering time-space environments is given an extra meaning here, since by experiencing those alterations, these sailors experienced their own bodies in new ways. In Thomas' (2003) terms, overcoming a barrier to 'doing' (a functional barrier) can have an influence on overcoming a barrier to 'being'. The two are tightly interconnected. Moreover, as we have seen, adapted environments can challenge us to identify a category of disabled people as opposed to a category of non-disabled people. Some of the medical students accompanying the disabled sailors also experienced differences in their physical functioning, and felt that the adapted ship facilitated their ability to 'fit' into the sailing experience (Garland-Thomson 2011). The idea of misfitting is not necessarily something which divides humanity into the 'misfits' and the 'fits', since there are ways in which we all may misfit at certain times (Thompson et al., 2016).

Blue et al. (2016, 24) suggest that access to new social practices may provide the 'missing' link where inequalities are mediated and maintained within public health. The potential for re-configuration within a joint practice is borne out in the students' post-voyage reflections around the need for adapted social practices which challenge institutional arrangements at the outset, rather than accommodating perceived physical difference in the moment. Further, the accounts of disabled sailors and students alike highlight the importance of the 'social'. Embodiment is not just about the individual body and the physical environment, but experiences can be subtly and deeply altered by the jointness of human action. Thus this paper shows how the alteration in a practice such as sailing can enable individuals to join together, to relate to each other, and to experience their differences as constructive teamwork. In our case, maybe this notion of team-work was particularly salient, since both the disabled sailors and the medical students faced a common and larger power, the sea. The meaning of the sea as an elemental force was not just a poetic metaphor for the sailors; it was a context in which human beings became smaller, more inter-dependent, and more malleable in their abilities and disabilities.

Using the lens of social practice theory has helped us to understand better the meanings, the competences and the materiality of sailing as a practice, and to gain an insider view of what it meant for disabled sailors to experience this 'adapted' environment. Although analytically Shove, Pantzar and Watson's (2012) theory of social practice separates out elements of competence, meaning and material resources, experientially the three elements interconnect for disabled people. Competence as a sailor increases with time, but specifically can be a major part of interacting with an adapted sailing ship, and people in this study were proud of the ways in which they could manage the ship. However, the wider meaning of sailing was not just about their own bodies or proving their competence to others; it was far more about the 'pull of the sea', the common ability to experience something larger and more powerful than themselves, their disability or their abilities.

The authors hope that further connections will be made between the ideas in social practice theories, and the insights of disabled scholars. We also hope that the model of joint sailing on tall ships will continue to contribute questions that will trouble and extend categorizations such as 'active', 'passive' and 'able-bodied'. In Mol's terms (2004), the voyage stories provide an opportunity to richly recount embodied lived experience as opposed to account for complex and idiosyncratic embodiment.

As John, a disabled sailor said, 'Perhaps its time to join up the dots – medical, academic and anecdotal.'

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## Competing interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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