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The Warrior Identity: Self-Identity Transformation and Flourishing in Parataekwondo Athletes of NPC Sleman

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Abstract

Background: Individuals with congenital disabilities and growth impairments often face the dual challenges of anatomical physical limitations and social stigma. However, involvement in competitive martial arts such as parataekwondo offers a space for existential redefinition. Objective: This study explores the psychological dynamics and identity transformation of parataekwondo athletes at the National Paralympic Committee (NPC) Sleman through a phenomenological lens. Methods: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach was employed, involving six purposively selected participants with growth impairments. Data validity was enhanced through source triangulation involving the Chairman of NPC Sleman, coaches, and athlete activists. Results: The thematic analysis revealed three superordinate themes: (1) Spatial-Body Transformation, where athletes experience a "functional height" that transcends anatomical boundaries; (2) The Warrior Identity, representing a shift from being a person with a disability to becoming an empowered combatant subject; and (3) Integrative Flourishing, where optimal fuinctioning is achieved through environmental mastery and radical self-acceptance. The findings indicate that this transformation occurs through the integration of kinesthetic experience and systemic community support. Conclusion: Competitive sport for individuals with disabilities serves as a mechanism for identity restoration. This research reinforces the proposition of Flourishing Psychology suggesting that physical limitations do not impede the attainment of eudaimonia when individuals can integrate their limitations into a cohesive and strong identity.

Keywords: Flourishing, Identity Transformation, IPA, NPC Sleman, Parataekwondo, Warrior Identity.

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INTRODUCTION

The presence of individuals with congenital disabilities in competitive sports is often trapped in a medical stigma that views the body through the lens of static and permanent physical limitations. Traditional paradigms tend to focus attention on what is "missing" or "lacking" in the subject's anatomy, thus ignoring the potential for psychological growth that transcends these biological deficits. However, for parataekwondo athletes at the Sleman National Paralympic Committee (NPC), martial arts activities are not simply an effort to maintain fitness or motor rehabilitation, but rather a radical existential statement to transcend anatomical limitations (Watson, 2002; Huang & Brittain, 2006). The phenomenon of growth impairment from birth creates unique psychological challenges; where individuals must navigate social stigma while facing self-perceptions that are vulnerable to inferiority (Goffman, 1963; Reindal, 1999).

Although the study of disability sport psychology has grown, the majority of the literature is still dominated by a functional resilience perspective that focuses on post-traumatic adaptation (for those with acquired/accidental disabilities). There is a significant research gap in the literature regarding how individuals with congenital disabilities—who have never had a memory reference of a “normal body”—construct their self-identity when faced with a rigorous contact sport. Parataekwondo offers an interesting psychological anomaly: on the one hand, it demands aggression and physical dominance, but on the other hand, it provides a space for athletes with developmental disabilities to redefine the concepts of “strength” and “reach” that have traditionally been limited by the laws of biology.

This challenge is exacerbated by social constructs that often position people with disabilities as dependent and powerless subjects (Shakespeare, 2013). However, initial field observations indicate a profound dynamic of identity transformation when these athletes don the dobok uniform. The garments seem to act as "psychological armor" that initiates a process of renegotiation between the self and the outside world through kinesthetic movements on the mat. Phenomenologically, individuals with developmental disabilities often perceive the world as "too tall" and intimidating. Physical limitations in height are often mentally interpreted as limited reach of power over the environment.

When athletes perform kicking techniques (chagi), a phenomenon known as Spatial-Body Transformation occurs. In this moment, the athlete's awareness is no longer bound by the anatomical limits of short bones and flesh, but rather expands into a dynamic range of motion. They experience what is called "functional height"—a feeling in which the body's capacity to act exceeds the static size of its physical object (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Gallagher, 2005). Mastery of

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this martial arts technique not only serves to increase self-efficacy in a mechanistic sense (Bandura, 1997), but further, it triggers the birth of The Warrior Identity. This warrior identity slowly but surely replaces the passive narrative of disability with a narrative of agency, resilience, and strength (Smith & Sparkes, 2008).

The urgency of this research lies in the need to reposition the paradigm in viewing disability; from the medical-deficit model to the existential flourishing model. There is still very little exploration of how individuals with developmental disabilities since birth construct the meaning of "success" through pain and violent physical contact in martial arts. Based on the Flourishing Psychology paradigm (Widiantoro, 2026), physical limitations are not a limiting variable for the achievement of eudaimonia. Instead, these limitations can be a "transcendental catalyst" that forces individuals to develop a more intense environmental mastery than individuals without disabilities. This study is crucial to uncover how physical suffering on the mat is transformed into a source of positive emotions, engagement, and deep meaning in life (Ryff & Singer, 2008; Seligman, 2011).

Therefore, this study aims to deeply dissect the dynamics of identity transformation through the lens of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The focus of the research is directed at exploring the subjective meaning of the life experiences of six athlete participants at the Sleman NPC, in order to understand how the warrior identity is internalized and influences their flourishing condition. The validity of the findings in this study was validated through a source triangulation strategy involving the NPC Chairperson, coaches, and athlete activists, to produce a holistic, credible understanding construction, and have policy impacts for disability empowerment at the community level.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative design with an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach. IPA was chosen based on its aim to deeply explore how individuals interpret their significant life experiences (Smith et al., 2009). This approach is considered highly relevant for examining the phenomenon of identity transformation, as it allows researchers to engage in double hermeneutics; researchers attempt to interpret participants' attempts to make sense of their world (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The primary focus of this study lies in idiographic depth to understand the unique essence of athletes with developmental disabilities, as has been applied in studies of resilience among athletes with disabilities in local contexts (Wahyuni, 2022).

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Participants

The study involved six parataekwondo athletes under the auspices of the National Paralympic Committee (NPC) of Sleman Regency. The sample was selected using purposive sampling with strict homogeneity criteria, in accordance with the criteria.

the main prerequisite in science studies (Smith & Sparkes, 2008). Inclusion criteria include: (1) active athletes with a track record of achievements at the regional and national levels, (2) experiencing congenital disabilities in the form of physical growth retardation since birth, and (3) willing to share their life experiences openly through the interview process. The number of 6 participants is considered ideal to maintain a balance between the depth of data per individual and the researcher's ability to conduct comprehensive cross-theme analysis (Yardley, 2000).

Data collection technique

Primary data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol was designed flexibly to allow for spontaneous narratives about participants' bodily experiences and changes in self-concept. In addition to interviews, researchers also conducted participant observation during the training process at NPC Sleman to capture the dynamics of athletes' interactions with their physical environment directly. All audio data was recorded using digital devices and transcribed verbatim to ensure data authenticity before entering the analysis stage.

Credibility and Triangulation

To ensure the quality of research results through the principles of trustworthiness and validity of qualitative data, this study applies a source triangulation strategy (Yardley, 2000). In addition to primary data from athletes, researchers collected secondary data from three key parties as comparisons: (1) the Chairman of NPC Sleman to understand policy perspectives and institutional support; (2) coaches to obtain an overview of technical changes and athlete behavior on the mat; and (3) athlete activists to understand community dynamics and peer support. This process ensures that the Warrior Identity phenomenon is validated from various different perspectives.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis in this study followed the systematic Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) procedure developed by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009). The analysis process

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began with the reading and re-reading stage, where the researcher repeatedly read the transcripts to immerse themselves in the participants' narratives. The second stage was initial noting to provide descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual notes on the transcript text. Next, the researcher carried out the developing emergent themes stage by processing the initial notes into broader themes while still being based on authentic data, followed by searching for connections to group these themes into superordinate themes. The entire process concluded with the moving to the next case stage, which is to repeat the same procedure for each participant consistently before finally conducting a final integration across cases to discover the essence of the phenomenon being studied.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents in-depth findings from an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of the lived experiences of parataekwondo athletes at NPC Sleman. Through systematic analysis, this study reveals that involvement in martial arts is not simply a physical activity, but rather an existential journey that transforms how individuals with disabilities view their bodies, identities, and positions in the world. The following is a description of the observations and key themes that emerged from the field data abstraction:

RESULTS TABLE AND ANALYSIS

Table 1. Profile of Research Participants (NPC Sleman Parataekwondo Athletes)

Code	Type Sex	Age	Types of Disabilities	Sports Experience	Recent Achievements
P1	Man	20	Growth Restriction (Congenital)	4 years	Silver Medal Individual Poompae
P2	Man	20	Growth Restriction (Congenital)	3 years	Kyorugi Bronze Medal
P3	Woman	43	Growth Restriction (Congenital)	7 Years	Bronze Medal
P4	Woman	20	Growth Restriction (Congenital)	1 year	Kyorugi Silver Medal
P5	Man	41	Growth Restriction (Congenital)	4 years	Silver Medal Kyorugi

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P6	Man	36	Growth Restriction (Congenital)	2 years	Kyorugi Gold Medal

Table 2. Thematic Matrix: Identity Transformation and Flourishing

Superordinate Themes	Sub-Themes (Emergent Themes)	Keywords / Essence of Experience	Relation to Psychology Flourishing
1. Spatial-Body Transformation	a. Sense of Reach b. Height Functional	Transcending the physical limits of anatomy; feeling "high" and dominant on the mat.	Environmental Mastery: Mastery over previously intimidating spaces.
2. Birth of The Warrior Identity	a. Identity Restoration b. Stigma Management	The shift in label from "disabled" (passive) to "fighter" (active/powerful).	Self-Acceptance & Purpose in Life: Radical self-acceptance and the discovery of meaning through achievements.
3. Integrative Flourishing	a. Collective Resilience b. Sense of Belonging	NPC Sleman's systemic support; a sense of wholeness through contribution and community.	Positive Relations & Accomplishment: Optimal functioning through social integration and achievement.

Theme 1: Spatial-Body Transformation: Beyond Anatomical Boundaries and Negotiating Space

The first finding in this study highlights how participants experienced a radical shift in their perception of their physical bodies within the context of Taekwondo. For individuals with congenital disabilities such as growth impairment, public spaces are often perceived as intimidating due to the significant difference in physical size. This aligns with the view that physical limitations often limit social participation due to environmental barriers and stigma (Brittain, 2004).

However, through active engagement in martial arts training, anatomical boundaries previously perceived as static constraints undergo a process of "thawing" or functional

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renegotiation. Participants reported that when wearing the dobok and performing striking techniques, they no longer felt constrained by their below-average physical dimensions. This is profoundly reflected in the following statement by Participant 4 (20 years old):
"I have, like when I first started training, it was hard because I couldn't keep up, but I gradually got the hang of it. It's like when I first saw my friends, I felt inferior because they could do it, but after a while, it turned out I could do it, and gradually I was able to follow, even though it was a bit slow. When I was wearing the dobok and doing kicks (chagi), my legs felt really long. I felt like I could reach the target. On the mat, I was more enthusiastic about kicking."

A similar statement was also expressed by Participant 5 (41 years old) who emphasized the aspect of expanding the reach of power:
"When I step and do a spinning kick, I feel like the space around me is mine. I feel bigger than I actually am. That feeling of being 'small' disappears completely once I start competing."

The motivation to overcome physical limitations through competitive sports is indeed the main driving force for disabled athletes to prove their agency (Fung, 1992).

This subjective transformation was strongly validated by field observations and source triangulation with coaches at the Sleman NPC. The coaches noted a marked change in non-verbal aspects; athletes who typically tended to slouch or avoid eye contact in public spaces transformed into individuals with upright postures, raised chins, and highly expansive movements on the mat. The coaches asserted:
"There's a kind of energy that explodes when they enter the fighting area. They no longer see taller opponents as threats, but as reachable targets. Their bodies seem to elongate through the techniques they've mastered."

Phenomenologically, this phenomenon represents a significant transformation of the body schema. As Merleau-Ponty (1962) explains, the body is not simply a static biological object, but rather the primary instrument of human agency in establishing relationships with the world. In the case of these parataekwondo athletes, sports equipment and mastery of martial arts techniques have been incorporated into their body schema, so that the boundaries of body awareness extend beyond the anatomical limits of skin and bone (Galagher, 2005). This experience creates what is called "functional height" - a condition in which the body's capacity to act exceeds the static dimensions of its physical object.

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Within the framework of Flourishing Psychology (Widiantoro, 2026), this experience is a concrete manifestation of Environmental Mastery. The physical inability to grow vertically is compensated by the psychological ability to master the environment through motor competence. This aligns with Shusterman's (2008) argument regarding somaesthetics, where trained body awareness increases self-efficacy and perceptions of power over space. This condition suggests that flourishing begins when individuals stop viewing the body as a "prison of limitations" and begin to view it as a "center of potential." By experiencing functional height, athletes are able to mitigate feelings of inferiority caused by physical stigma (Goffman, 1963) and lay the foundation for achieving complete eudaimonic well-being.

Theme 2: The Birth of the Warrior Identity: Redefining the Self from "Disabled" to "Fighter"

The dynamics of transformation experienced by participants did not stop at changes in spatial perception, but continued into a more fundamental reconstruction of self-identity. For individuals with congenital developmental disabilities, the label "disabled" or "handicapped" often became the primary identity that dictated their daily social interactions. This old identity tended to be passive and destructive to self-esteem. However, through the parataekwondo arena, a significant shift in identity narrative occurred. Participants began to adopt what is known as The Warrior Identity, where attributes of achievement and physical toughness began to dominate their self-concept. This is explicitly revealed in the following narrative from Participant 3 (43 years old):

"Before I started taekwondo, I felt like I hadn't socialized with other people with disabilities. Sometimes people looked down on me, but that's normal, we're also aware that we have our shortcomings. But now, if someone asks, say, an athlete at NPC Sleman, I feel proud. Now, I rarely get pity, sis, they know, oh, so you can do this (kick), huh? Oh, so it turns out Iso is like a duet, let's say that, sis, especially here (NPC Sleman)."

This change in self-narrative demonstrates the highly effective process of stigma management through the reconstruction of a more empowering life story (Smith & Sparkes, 2008). As explained by Goffman (1963), individuals with attributes deemed "deviant" by society tend to undertake identity restoration efforts to mitigate the impact of that stigma. In this context, participants engaged in an identity replacement strategy, where heroic athletic attributes were used to replace a spoiled identity or one tainted by disability (Link & Phelan, 2001). Similarly, Participant 1 (20 years old) stated that the dobok uniform and the medals he won served as

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symbols of validation of his agency:

"The medal is proof that I'm not just someone who needs help, but someone who can fight and win."

The analysis of the interview data revealed that the birth of this warrior identity did not occur instantly, but rather through a series of "physical baptisms" on the training mats. The pain of receiving a kick and the satisfaction of successfully landing an attack became empirical evidence for the subjects that their bodies were "functional" and "powerful." Validation of the birth of this warrior identity was also found through source triangulation with the Head of the Sleman NPC. He emphasized that the organizational culture at the NPC was deliberately designed to eradicate the victim mentality and replace it with a warrior mentality:

"We don't educate them to be pitied. We educate them to be fighters. Here, the 'disabled' identity is secondary; their status as professional athletes is paramount."

This statement is supported by observations by Athlete Activists who note that this new identity provides a sense of "brotherhood in arms" among fellow athletes, which strengthens their collective resilience in the face of social discrimination. This fighter identity serves as an ego shield that allows them to remain upright in the face of disparaging gazes from the general public.

Theoretically, the birth of The Varrior Identity is a crucial bridge to a flourishing state. Based on the Flourishing Psychology paradigm (Widiantoro, 2026), optimal human functioning is highly dependent on an individual's ability to engage in radical Self-Acceptance—that is, accepting physical conditions as they are while still having the agency to achieve the highest achievements. This transformation is a manifestation of the achievement of Eudaimonic Well-being (Ryff & Singer, 2008). In this state, individuals no longer seek fleeting happiness (hedonia), but instead find the meaning of life through struggle and self-mastery. As emphasized by Seligman (2011) in the Accomplishment element of the PERMA model, achieving competence in this hard martial art provides a permanent sense of self-worth.

The construction of this fighter identity is supported by various empirical literatures that confirm the positive correlation between martial arts and strengthening self-concept (Finkenberg, 1990; Lakes & Hoyt, 2004). Changes in body image to be more positive (Cash, 2004) is a crucial mechanism for individuals to renegotiate their social position in a society dominated by

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perceptual barriers (Brittain, 2004; Shakespeare, 2013). The success of the athletes at NPC Sleman in achieving this self-determination is in line with the principles of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2008), where the fulfillment of the need for autonomy and competence is the main driving force to rise from adversity to a phase of meaningful growth.

Theme 3: Integrative Flourishing through the Sleman NPC Community: Collective Resilience and Optimal Functioning

The final findings of this study reveal that the transformation of athletes' identities and body perceptions does not occur in isolation, but rather is the result of dynamic interactions within the Sleman National Paralympic Committee (NPC) community. This competitive sport ecosystem serves as a platform for what the researchers call Integrative Flourishing, where individual well-being is combined with systemic support and collective resilience. For athletes with developmental disabilities, this community provides a sense of belonging that is often difficult to find in the often less inclusive general public environment (Goodwin & Watkinson, 2000).

Participant 6 (36 years old) described this depth of social support as a safe space that freed him from social alienation:

"Outside, I feel alone facing the ridicule. But at NPC, we're all the same. We have similar challenges, so no one feels out of place. We support each other; if someone falls during practice, the others cheer them up. It's like a family. I feel like my life is complete here, because I don't have to hide anymore."

This strong sense of relatedness is a key pillar in strengthening athletes' resilience. Through triangulation of sources with Athlete Activists, the phenomenon of "Social-Contagion Resilience" was discovered, where the success of one athlete in overcoming physical obstacles or winning a championship is contagious and becomes a collective motivation for other athletes. This phenomenon reflects how the components of optimal experiences in group activities can encourage positive mental health (Delle Fave et al., 2011).

Further analysis shows that the NPC Sleman community is not just a place for physical training, but rather a space for "psychosocial healing." Here, athletes learn that their self-worth is not determined by the gaze of society, but by their contributions.

and struggles on the mat. This peer support creates a safe environment for athletes to

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experiment with their Warrior Identity without fear of social judgment.

Triangulated data from the Chairman of the Sleman NPC confirms that the success of achieving a flourishing state was also driven by a structured achievement system through medal and record targets. He stated:

"We've created an ecosystem where achievement is paramount. When they see their friends winning, they're not jealous, but rather, they feel, 'If they can do it, so can I.' That's the true flourishing of the NPC."

This integration between individual achievement and community support creates a continuous cycle of growth, which moves the individual from a stagnant (languishing) condition to a flourishing condition as a whole (Keyes, 2002).

Participant 2 (20 years old) added that winning in the arena provides a transcendent dimension of meaning in life:

"When I stood on the podium wearing the uniform (the Sleman NPC uniform), I felt truly alive, so proud. I felt useful to my region."

Theoretically, this dynamic validates the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011), particularly the Positive Relationships and Accomplishment pillars. However, in the context of athletes with congenital disabilities, these pillars are transformed through the Flourishing Psychology paradigm (Widiantoro, 2026). From this perspective, flourishing is seen as an integrative process in which individuals are able to transform the existential "cracks" caused by disability into social "glue" that strengthens the community.

Optimal functioning (eudaimonia) is achieved when athletes not only accept themselves but are also able to make meaningful contributions to their environment (Ryff & Singer, 2008). Thus, NPC Sleman is not just a sports institution, but a social laboratory that proves that physical limitations can be a catalyst for the birth of a more resilient, whole, and empowered humanity amidst the challenges of urban society.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the involvement of parataekwondo athletes with congenital

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developmental disabilities at NPC Sleman serves not only as a sporting activity but also as a profound process of identity transformation. Key findings reveal the phenomenon of Spatial-Body Transformation, a shift in body perception that allows athletes to transcend anatomical limitations through mastery of technique and range of motion on the mat. This transformation then develops into The Warrior Identity, where the identity of "disabled" previously associated with social stigma shifts to the identity of a "fighter" who is empowered, resilient, and full of agency. Support from the NPC Sleman community also strengthens the Integrative Flourishing process through a sense of belonging, positive relationships, and meaningful achievements. These findings emphasize that flourishing is not determined by physical perfection, but rather by an individual's ability to interpret limitations as a source of strength and psychological growth.

However, this study has limitations because it only involved six participants with specific physical disabilities in one sports community in the Sleman region, thus limiting the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the phenomenological approach focuses on subjective experiences, so interpretation of meaning is strongly influenced by the participants' personal context. Therefore, future research is recommended to expand the scope to include other types of disabilities, different sports, and use a longitudinal approach to examine the dynamics of identity transformation on an ongoing basis. Practically, the results of this study provide implications that martial arts can be used as a medium for psychological and social intervention for people with disabilities to build self-confidence, resilience, and optimal functioning. Strengthening achievement-based communities is also important to develop as a more inclusive and dignified empowerment space.

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