“I do not compete in disability”: How wheelchair athletes challenge the discourse of able-ism through action and resistance

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Abstract: Drawing on data from face-to-face semi-structured interviews with five male and four female wheelchair athletes and inspired by poststructuralism, this study illuminates the meaning-making processes through which athletes construct and manage their identities. It deals with the interaction of gender, disability and sport and illustrates how the discourse of able-ism operates among Swedish wheelchair racers. The main finding is that the discourse of able-ism has considerable impact on the way the athletes understand themselves and the world, and, thus, on their identity construction. They strive to gain access to the discursive world of able-bodied people and, to that end, they reproduce sports and gender discourses. They strongly resist being positioned as disabled, but in doing so they sometimes reproduce the discourse of able-ism by positioning other disabled people as deviant. Overall, the investigation contributes to a further understanding of how social notions and expectations in contemporary society are reproduced, resisted and deconstructed.

Keywords: Able-ism, disability, discourse, gender, identity sport, impairment, wheelchair racing.

A prominent idea in Western cultures of today is that the body can be controlled, and that those facing difficulties in doing so are seen (and may see themselves) as failures. In that respect, athletes who perform at the top level in wheelchair racing are subjected to contradictory meanings. On the one hand, they are by definition disabled. On the other hand, they are more able-bodied than most other people, since their bodies are physically tuned to perform at the highest level. In this context, the aim of this study is to illuminate the strategies employed by elite wheelchair racers in order to cope with this contradiction.

Historically, disabled people have been regarded as a homogenous group in all kinds of ways – gender being one of them (Thomas, 1999; Cosgrove, 2000; Hargreaves, 2000; Barron, 2004; Reinikainen, 2004; Robertson, 2004). Even though some studies have attended to gender and disability issues, few have focused specifically on the intersection of disability, gender and sport (Grey, 1996; Kolkka & Williams, 1997; Blinde & McCallister, 1999; Hargreaves, 2000). Despite the fact that women’s involvement in sport has increased during the last few decades, social institutions, cultural practices and modes of representation associated with sport are still male-dominated (Theberge, 2000; Whannel, 2002).
Some of the issues that have been dealt with in the literature have been critical analyses focused on the reproduction of gender relations and male privilege through sport as a patriarchal practice and sport as a site for masculinist hegemony (Birrell, 2000). However, as regards the marginalization of women in sport, increasingly sophisticated efforts have been made to combat gender inequality. For example, feminist theorists struggle towards a more complete understanding of the complex dynamic power relations of which gender relations are a fundamental part and of possibilities of empowerment and resistance through sport (Birrell, 2000; Hargreaves, 2000; Theberge, 2000; Hall, 2002; Scraton & Flintoff, 2002; Kay, 2003). This issue has also been dealt with by several Scandinavian researchers such as Larsson (2001), Olofsson (1989, 2002), Fasting (2005) and Hovden (2005).

Some scholars argue that sport as a social institution serves in different ways to construct mainstream values which often privilege white heterosexual middle-class men and marginalize, for instance, female and disabled athletes (Kay, 2003; Wright, 2004; Olofsson, 2003, 2005). In that sense, sport can be considered as an able-bodied activity as it serves as a site for celebrating skills and values clearly linked to masculinity and physical ability (Wendell, 1997; Schell & Rodriguez, 2001).

Feminist research and disability scholarship have a lot in common. For instance, issues of the body, social and cultural hierarchy, identity, discrimination and inequality, representation, and political activism have been central to both fields (Thomas, 1999; Hargreaves, 2000, 2004; Guthrie & Castelnuovo, 2001; Barron, 2004; Kristiansen & Traustadóttir, 2004). In addition, the concept of disability takes much of its meaning from the coordinate concept of able-bodied, as femininity derives its meaning in relationship to masculinity (Smith & Hutchison, 2004). Consequently, there is a considerable body of literature on gender and disability studies concerned with identity formation.

To highlight and theorize links to the lived experiences of oppressive relationships such as, for instance, the relationship between gender and disability and how they are manifested in sport certainly has relevance for current feminist research. Overall, the present study focuses on the meaning-making process whereby the athletes construct and practice their identities. Drawing on feminist poststructuralist theory, it first discusses how discourse, meaning and identity are conceptualized. Secondly, the article deals with the social and medical model of disability and the terminology involved. Thirdly, the concept discourse of able-ism is introduced and finally, there is a presentation and discussion of the findings.

**Theoretical approach**

Discourse, meaning and identity

In this study discourse is a fundamental concept. It comprises what is possible to express in speech and text within a specific social, cultural or historical context. In a sense, language constitutes our social reality, and from that perspective, discourse can be described as a distinctive way of talking and thinking about phenomena (Mills,
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From a feminist post-structuralist point of view, gender as a social category is a discursive construction. In different discourses varying meanings are attached to what it means to be a woman or man. Likewise, categories like disabled and able-bodied are also discursively constituted. Moreover, poststructuralists strive to dissolve dichotomies and to deconstruct the dualistic thinking that divides the world into binaries such as female/male, culture/nature and disabled/able-bodied (Shildrick, 1997).

The notions of subjectivity and identity are central to feminist poststructuralist thinking. Identities are considered to be multiple and constantly reconstituted in and through discourses (Wright, 2004). In the same way as participants in the American reality TV show “The Swan” (2006) seek to transform themselves from ugly ducklings into beautiful swans through plastic surgery, cosmetic dental treatment and fitness programmes, people often try, in general, to position themselves normatively (rather than on the margins or non-normatively) in relation to the dominant discourses. Such hegemonic discourses produce social and cultural expectations of how human beings should look and act and they also govern the way people construct themselves and their identities. Further, identity is regarded as an unstable and insecure human attribute depending on whatever discourses are reproduced by the subject. In order to maintain any sense of “who I am”, the subjects have to participate constantly in the process of construction and reconstruction of the boundaries of their selves through an ongoing process of differentiating themselves from the “other” (Weedon, 1997; Thomas, 1999). In that sense, identity can be considered as a production that is never complete and always constituted within, not outside representation (Hall, 1990, 222). As individuals inserted in specific discourses, we repeatedly perform models of subjectivity and identity until these are experienced as if they were second nature. Where they are successfully incorporated, they become part of a lived subjectivity. Where this does not occur, they may become the basis of disidentification or counter-identification which involves a rejection of hegemonic identity norms (Weedon, 2004, 7). Of particular relevance to this study is the theory of “abjection”. The “abject” described by Butler (1999, 169) designates that which have been expelled from the body, discharged as excrement, literally rendered “other”. This appears as an expulsion of alien elements, but the alien is effectively established through this expulsion. In other words, that which is not proper is pushed away, it is refused, it is sent to the margin; it is abjected (Fusco, 2006, 9).

Able-ism as discourse

Concerning disability, there is a wide range of definitions of deviance, illness, impairment and disability. These terms are conceptualized in different models that explain the nature of the phenomena or human experience (Barnes & Mercer, 2003; Thomas, 2004). In contrast, corresponding models and definitions of normal and able are not available. Even though disability can be considered as a category theoretically open to everyone, and since disability, unlike gender and ethnicity, is something that slowly emerges over time or happens dramatically in an accident, most people do not see
themselves temporarily or gradually transforming from able-bodied to disabled (Garland Thomson, 1997a). Perhaps the fact that anyone can become disabled at any time makes disability even more threatening to those who assume that they have access to the able-bodied position (Longmore, 2003). In other words, disabled people represent everything that the able-bodied world fears most – loss, pain, tragedy and the unknown. Consequently, able-ism provides neutral standards against which disabled people (as well as, for instance, women, gays, and radical/ethical minority groups) are measured and valued for their “otherness”.

In an earlier study of the meanings and representations of wheelchair racers in sports media texts (Wickman, 2006), I noted that the sports media texts constructed the subject of “disabled athlete”, which indirectly reproduced a conception of the “disabled” as a copy and the “able-bodied” as the original. The exclusion was, however, concealed and neutralized through the regulation and differentiation that able-ism legitimated. Preferential right of interpretation was thus given to those who represented and upheld the boundaries of able-ism, thereby re-producing its hegemonic structure. As I argued, able-bodied people are never spoken of in terms of difference, since they represent an implicit, “taken-for-granted”, standard that is both ideal and normative. Further, in this discursive reality, particular truth claims are justified and perpetuated by different social institutions in society, and sport can be considered as one of them. In accordance with my previous findings and the arguments above, able-ism is understood and conceptualized as a dominating discourse which operates in silence, constantly producing meanings that serve as given “truths” of sameness and differences. In this particular study, one question posed is what role the discourse of able-ism plays in the ways the wheelchair racers manage their own identity construction?

The aim of the study

The study reported in this paper deals with the complex interaction of gender, disability and sport discourses and illustrates how the discourse of able-ism is operating within the local context of wheelchair racing. The main questions for the study were:

In what ways is the discourse of able-ism reproduced by the athletes as they construct and practice their identities? For instance, to what extent are meanings of able-ism challenged and/or negotiated? How does the discourse of able-ism interact with other discourses?

Method

The research setting

This paper is based on face-to-face semi-structured interviews with nine Swedish wheelchair athletes, five men and four women who had been or still were competing at international level. Initially, contact with the participants was made by telephone. It was made clear that they were free to terminate the interview at any time without
having to provide a reason for doing so. All the interviews were conducted by myself, the researcher, and the responses were recorded on MP3-files, transcribed and finally, translated into English. Additionally, the interview questions were designed to allow the athletes to talk about issues that they felt were important for their own elite careers. These were gender issues, media attention, relationships to coaches and trainers, other wheelchair athletes and the Swedish Sports Organization for the Disabled (SHIF). The athletes were asked to choose where the interview should take place and each one was interviewed privately for up to one and half hours. At the end of the interview they were allowed to add anything they believed to be of importance. After the interviews were transcribed, the interviewees had the opportunity to review the transcripts and make corrections or additions. These procedures are accepted among qualitative researchers (Kvale, 1996; Gratton & Jones, 2004). All the interviewees in this study have varying degrees of physical paralysis and use standard wheelchairs in daily life. Some also had experience of able-bodied sports before their accident took place.

The analytic process

The process of analysis started during the interviews when the wheelchair racers made new associations and connections in our conversation. By asking follow-up questions according to the emerging themes, I was able to verify initial interpretations. When all the interviews had been transcribed into text files, I systematically analysed the data by literally cutting the texts into pieces in an attempt to find central themes and answers to the stated research questions. In their talk about various issues, the athletes recited a particular discourse as they replicated its dominating meanings. At other times, they challenged the discourse by explicitly or implicitly questioning its basic norms or by activating more than one discourse at a time. For instance, in several cases the gender discourse was drawn on in combination with the sport discourse.

In an attempt to fully investigate the experiences and representations of the wheelchair racers and their multiple identities, this study aims to examine disability, gender and sport as intersecting aspects of subjectivity and not as independent categories. However, the discourses are described separately for the purposes of analysis. A brief outline is given below of the characteristic features of the disability, gender and sport discourses. It has to be borne in mind that, since all of these discourses produce and reproduce hegemonic meanings of able-ism, they are assumed to be dialectical and overlapping.

As for the disability discourse, as disabled people are looked upon, identified, judged and represented primarily trough their bodies, the meanings associated with the disabled body are to be imperfect, incomplete and inadequate (Hargreaves, 2000). Supporting this perspective is the assumption of the medical profession that disabled people wish to be “normal” or “physically whole”. Further, the therapeutic practice, such as rehabilitation and technology, serves to normalize the impaired body by reducing the sense of corporal difference (Karpf, 1997; Swain & French, 2000; Barnes, Mercer & Shakespeare, 2005). Moreover, mainstream representations of disabled people in the media are often influenced by stereotypes of, for instance the
“tragic but brave invalid”, the “undesirable other”, the “sinister cripple”, and the “superscript” who has triumphed over tragedy (Schell & Duncan, 1999; Shakespeare, 1999; Thomas & Smith, 2003). Feminist researchers have found that women are frequently represented as sexual objects, but disabled women often encounter so-called “asexual objectification”, the assumption that sexuality is inappropriate in disabled people (Garland Thomson, 1997a). Finally, disabled heroes are commonly people with visible impairments who receive public attention because they accomplish things that are unusual even for able-bodied people (Wendell, 1997).

As regards the gender discourse, cultural codes of the body, dress and behaviour such as sexuality and attractiveness signify gender and, consequently, characteristic features of femininity and masculinity (Weedon, 2004). For instance, masculinity has tended to be defined through notions of strength, rationality, self-reliance, potency, and action (Kimmel, 2000; Robertson, 2004). Meanings associated with femininity are characterized by passivity and fragility, beauty, self-sacrifice and responsiveness to others’ needs (Creedon, 1994; Garland Thomson, 1997a, 1997b, 2004). Despite the fact that the gender discourse in many ways reflects general and powerful structures in society of male privilege and power and female disadvantages and subordination, women are no longer necessarily in “the shadow of men”. In fact, historically there have always been women (and men) who have transgressed boundaries of womanhood, manhood as well as homosexuality, heterosexuality (Hargreaves, 2004).

Some of the characteristic features of the sport discourse can be illustrated with the meanings associated with competition, victory, physicality, athleticism, aggressiveness, toughness, heroism and masculinity. Traditionally, sport and exercise are sites where the objectification of the body has been promoted. Moreover, doing sport is always doing gender as it always presents itself as male or female with more or less demonstrative masculinity and femininity (Hall, 1996; Whannel, 2002; Knight & Giuliano, 2003). Further, media have a tendency to trivialize female athletes by devoting a disproportionately smaller amount of time to their performances as well as by highlighting their physical attractiveness (Olofsson, 2002). On top of it, the sport discourse is considered to be powerful, promoting white above black, male above female, physical prowess above alternative qualities, and certain body types above others (Kay, 2003; Fitzgerald & Jobling, 2004).

Results
The findings of the study were summarized into three themes: 1) activating the sport discourse, 2) activating the gender discourse and 3) challenging the disability discourse. All the individuals who appear in the text have been given pseudonyms. The four female wheelchair racers are called Ingrid, Laila, Anna and Liselotte and the five male wheelchair racers Max, Lennart, Patrik, Leo and Gustav.

1) Activating the sport discourse
In general, “disability sport” refers to sport that has primarily been designed for or specially practiced by disabled athletes. It also includes sports practiced by able-
bodied individuals that have been modified or adapted to include disabled athletes (DePauw & Gavron, 2005). However, those athletes who have severe impairments and participate in “disability sports” are not considered to be “real” athletes by the interviewees, basically because their performances are not consistent with dominant cultural notions of what sport is and should be about. As a consequence, the interviewees did not identify themselves as disabled athletes. Instead, they work hard at identifying themselves as NOT-disabled, at differentiating themselves from this group.

Questioning disability sport
The interviewees seem to take the stance that disability sport is not real sport – it does not fit the sport discourse. They wish to position themselves and be positioned as “athletes”, to be judged in terms of the criteria of the dominant sport discourse. To do so they have to distance themselves from the “other” that they may be mistaken for. Most commonly the interviewees emphasize that disability sport is something that people in general do not identify with in the way in which they identify with non-disabled/mainstream sport. Like many European countries, Sweden can be considered a sport-loving nation. The majority of the nation’s stars are sport stars and the fit able-bodied (male) sportsperson is central to discourses of national image and identity. However, disability sports do not seem to work in this way. In such statements the interviewees expressed feelings of otherness. Moreover, they also tried hard to position themselves within the discourse of able-ism by challenging dominating meanings attached to disability sport. The first quotation is about the characterization of “disability sport”:

> It is as if people cannot identify with a disabled person. I mean, when Sweden wins a gold medal in archery (…) or in ice hockey or football or pentathlon or something – then it is “we” who win the gold medal. If it is a disabled person who wins a gold medal – then it is “they”. It is not “We – Sweden” (Laila).

The second quotation illustrates how the interviewee rejects “disability sport” as it threatens to disrupt his identity in the process of constructing himself as able-bodied and as an athlete:

> My identity is not disability sport. How do you practice disability sport? Do you injure yourself a bit more or what? (…) I can play basketball, swim, play table tennis – but how do you practice disability sport? It doesn’t exist (Lennart).

In the next quotation it is obvious that the interviewee finds it difficult to handle the contradictory meanings attached to the elite athlete position on the one hand and the position as disabled on the other. Being active in elite sports can be interpreted as strategies for recovering to a certain extent from a state of “otherness” and for getting closer to the able-ism norm. On the other hand, the interviewee’s experience of being
positioned as the “other” by saying “they have failed” referring to the medical profession (the voice of able-ism), which seems to create a disabled sportsman out of what once was an able-bodied athlete. In that sense, the message is that one becomes “the other”, the passive victim in the rehabilitation process. It is clear, however, that the interviewees want to be judged on those attributes that are valued in the sport discourse, and want to be the best according to the rules of the sports discourse (most skilled, strongest, fastest etc):

When you are injured and undergo something called rehabilitation, the aim is that you should come back as much as possible to what you were, or improve what you were or whatever. But what you get out of it at the other end is a disabled sportsman. Then they have failed, I think. (...) And then they give this to me [disability sports] somehow, because I have been injured. Now that I am on the other side of the accident, then suddenly it is an entirely different thing. The sport is not as tough any longer, competition-wise (Patrik).

Claiming elite sport status
All the interviewees prefer their identity as elite athletes and they actively produce and maintain this identity by representing themselves as wheelchair racers. Sometimes, however, they must literally fight for this identity, as this status is certainly not always acknowledged by other people. The next quotation involves power and resistance. Clearly, the discourse of able-ism is powerful, and in many respects this top elite wheelchair racer is excluded from it. In order to maintain the preferred sense of “who I am” the interviewee has to participate in the process of construction and reconstruction of boundaries of the self through an ongoing process of differentiating himself from the “others”. His identity as a sportsman, Swede and human being is not a matter of course but must be constantly practiced. The male athlete relates his experiences from the Stockholm Marathon. He has just passed the first able-bodied runner and the finish line:

“Shoo, shoo!” As if I was a dog: “Shoo, shoo!” – What? “Well, you are not allowed to be here”, said the attendant. But I am… What? I have just won. But this is the Winner’s Circle, you see. Exactly, I said; I have won. (...) I can feel myself boiling with anger. So of course I went in there. (...) and the commentator says: “Now the first Swede is coming in.” Wow, I thought. I am not even a Swede any more! (...) It was so bloody insulting to hear. This is thus the first Swedish runner, he came in seventh. Then you must of course say the first Swedish runner, not the first Swede. Because he was already sitting there. I had been sitting there for eight minutes (Lennart).

The next quotation illustrates how the Swedish Sports Organization for the Disabled (SHIF) accepts its place on the margins and contributes to the construction of its “othered” position and the “othering” of disabled athletes by the mainstream sports
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discourse – other in relation to the standard. In the next quotation, one interviewee criticizes the headline of an advertisement produced by SHIF:

“We are not the greatest, we are not the best, but there are many of us and we are rather good.” – And it is really fantastic to be described like that if you sort of put your heart and soul into sport, and then they think that we are “rather good”. Because I think, what other sport would present itself like that? (Ingrid).

As has been emphasized previously, the athletes are oppressively disciplined by the normative discourse of able-ism and relate painful experiences of being treated as “second rate performers”. However, they subject themselves to the code and ranking system of elite sport in an attempt to get closer to the discourse of able-ism – to resist/challenge being positioned as “other”. By actively constructing their own bodies and the meaning attached to them, they claim access to the sport discourse and thus demand that wheelchair racing should be put on an equal footing with other elite sports.

Differentiating oneself from the “others”
The subject cannot position itself outside the discourse of able-ism, therefore it is constructed as either disabled or able-bodied. What it means to be disabled or able-bodied depends, however, on interactive discourses. As the discourse of able-ism is normative, the athletes are under pressure to pass as normal or to aspire to some approximation of “normality”. Therefore, as an attempt to get closer to the norm, they sometimes reproduce oppressive features of the disability discourse. In their talk, they position those who participate in disability sport, who identify themselves as disabled, as the “other” in the “abject” category. This example of how the interviewees engage in the process of “othering” can also be described as the construction of a discrete subject through exclusion (Butler, 1999). This strategy does not challenge the discourse of able-ism but is rather an acceptance of the discourse and the position it offers. The interviewees implicitly position themselves as “normal” by proclaiming that the position as disabled “exists” but that it does not include them. In order to construct their identities in accordance with the discourse of able-ism, the athletes in this sample differentiate themselves from the “others” – those with severe impairments. Two of the interviewees comment on a swimmer with severe impairments:

(…) he goes terribly slowly. Then it is disability sport. Then it is really disability sport. At the same time as it is a tremendous achievement, really, since he is terribly disabled (Laila).

You know, it is difficult to see the achievement, even if you can understand it is a person with neither arms nor legs who is going to swim, so it is rather fascinating that it is possible to swim at all (Patrik).
2) Activating the gender discourse

Masculinity
In competitive and elite sport all over the world women and men as well as disabled and able-bodied athletes are kept separate in different classes. For example, in wheelchair racing at top level, only athletes with impairments are allowed to compete and there are different classes for women and men. Since sport embodies dominating notions of masculinity, it becomes a discursive arena primarily for disabled men in which to redefine and reclaim their sense of maleness and self (Hargreaves, 2000; Kay, 2003). For instance, one male interviewee draws on dominant notions of masculinity and ability as he associates action and braveness with spinal cord injury:

If you have had an accident, then you have after all been fairly active and fairly, you have done something hip in a way, and you have been driving a motorbike bloody hard (…) – but on the other hand, if you were born with an impairment, then you are a loser from the very beginning. (…) To become a fully developed disabled person, so to speak, you must have some form of traumatic injury. It is the same with diseases and such, cancer, for example, it can be a bit cool somehow, but on the other hand, if you have got a muscular disease or something like that, then you are also a bit, not a victim perhaps, but you are still – that’s not so cool (Max).

Taking sport seriously and being serious are synonymous with being masculine. According to the next quotation, the interviewee manages her identity as a wheelchair racer by re-constructing the male hierarchy that is already a part of the gender and sport discourses by for instance revealing that “it was a masculine sport”, that she was drilled by guys. Two of the female interviewees position themselves in an inferior position in relation to the male wheelchair athletes and never actually challenge the male hierarchy:

But I think I became rather laddish in some way. But that’s me, you know. I am not terribly girlish otherwise either. (…) Well, I sort of became like them in my identity in some way. I was so terribly serious, so boringly serious, I would think now, that I took it so very seriously, I mean I forgot to have fun. It might have to do with being together only with guys, they are much harder and tougher, so I became like them in some way. (…) I was drilled by guys (Anna).

(…) Then I am more of a boy than a girl or a woman. And I have always been interested in technology. So they cannot catch me out there. I know every little screw on my wheelchair (Liselotte).

Femininity
According to the discourse of able-ism and the sport and gender discourse, women occupy complex, often multiple and contradictory positions. For instance, although
able-bodied women are increasingly targeted in audience development campaigns, these seek to appeal to them either as mothers, family decision-makers or through sex (Stevenson, 2004, 279). Conversely, disabled women are commonly associated with un-gendered passive victims (Thomas, 1997). The interviewee in the next quotation wished to position herself and be positioned as a gender-being in accordance to discourse of able-ism. To do so she rejected the positioning of disabled women as “passive victims”, unable to fulfill those expectations of motherhood, by taking her children to a photo shooting, despite the fact that the reportage was supposed to focus on a coming-up track racing event and not on her private life. This woman thus reproduces the gender discourse and the meanings associated with femininity to get access to the discourse of able-ism:

But there are probably a lot of people who believe that you can’t lead an ordinary, normal life; when you have children and that (…) I mean, if they had only seen me and my wheelchair, then they would perhaps not have thought that I can lead a normal life (Laila).

Gender neutral
The interviewees reject their construction as deviant from the norm that defines the able body and the gendered body. Further, they are critical of people’s understanding of them as gender-neutral and of those who treat them as another kind of human being:

And there was somebody who said: There are men’s sports, women’s sports and disability sports. It is the third sex. (…) And then we are suddenly sex-neutral. (…) So all of a sudden they don’t see us as sexual beings (Lennart).

3) Challenging the disability discourse
The powerful and oppressive discourse of able-ism produces resistance among the interviewees and they also challenge their marginalization. For instance, they seem to reclaim some form of positive identity out of the discourse of able-ism, creating what Weedon (2004) describes as counter-identifications which involve a rejection of hegemonic identity norms, in this case the disability discourse.

Reclaiming the sport discourse
Currently, able-bodied athletes or people with temporary impairments are not allowed to enter wheelchair track events (DePauw & Gaveron, 2005). Moreover, the Swedish Sports Organization for the Disabled (SHIF) organizes, supervises and coordinates the wheelchair track events for the Swedish racers. However, one of the interviewees suggested that wheelchair racing should be possible for able-bodied athletes to compete in and that the sport should be organized in a different way:

If our sport is ever going to gain respect, I think walkers must come in (…) the Swedish Sports Organization for the Disabled must allow walkers to compete to see that. So that people can see and the
reporters can see that it is not only special people who are doing this; and they have their special plays, they have their special games and they have their special chairs that only they can use – everybody must be allowed to use them. Then we might gain the respect that we deserve (Gustav).

Self-transformation through sport
Since the interviewees’ identities are constituted through discursive practices, elite sport involvement can be regarded as a strategy of self-transformation. By using sport as a way to claim their subjectivity, the wheelchair racers both reject and deconstruct their assigned role of invisibility or of being portrayed as the “other”. For instance, the strategy of deconstruction appears when the athletes identify themselves as wheelchair racers, not as disabled athletes:

I’m not a disabled sportswoman. I am a wheelchair athlete, because I don’t compete in disability. That’s not a sport (Anna).

Subconsciously I see myself as a disabled sportsman, but when I am training and competing I don’t think like that, but of what I am doing. Not that I am disabled (…) I mean, I am a wheelchair racer (Leo).

The interviewee in the next quotation is speaking about the “other”, those who identify themselves primarily as disabled and “I” who identifies himself as an athlete, equal to able-bodied athletes:

It is an extenuating circumstance to be disabled. I know it; I can feel it inside me. Then the achievement level doesn’t have to be equally as high, and you can drift along a bit more. That’s why you want your disability as number one: I am disabled, recognize it and you will understand that you cannot make the same demands on me. And I say: I am an athlete, make the same demands on me as on an athlete (Lennart).

Identity is made visible to others through cultural signs, symbol and practices. For wheelchair athletes, the racing wheelchair signifies a personal piece of technology that symbolizes power, speed and muscularity. Furthermore, the technology has the capacity to normalize disabled bodies and produce elite athletes (Hargreaves, 2000):

I really see myself as an athlete, as a wheelchair racer; I use the wheelchair as an athletic tool. I am active in wheelchair racing because I have a functional impairment, otherwise I might have been doing something else. But in practicing my sport I’m not a disabled sportsman in that way. I am simply a sportsman (Max).
Concluding remarks

A strong theme running through all of the interviewees’ responses was the way they managed their own identities by “othering”, of reconstructing hierarchies, and/or re-positioning themselves in relation to hierarchies that are already part of the sport, gender and disability discourses. For example, disabling processes in wheelchair racing can be seen to be twofold, both oppressive and liberating to the subject. Initially, an individual has to be classified and categorized as disabled to enter the realm of sport, and in that sense be accepted and accept herself/himself as disabled. Once accepted as a disabled person, the individual then has to contend with the difficulties of being accepted as an athlete by challenging dominating values, norms and standards of the culture in which elite sport operates. Such values are for instance independency and individualism, which stand in sharp contrast to the meanings of dependency that disability is commonly associated with.

The findings also indicate that the athletes were oppressively disciplined by the normative discourse of able-ism, and they related painful experiences of being treated as “second rate performers”. However, they subjected themselves to the code and ranking system of elite sport in an attempt to get closer to the discourse of able-ism – to resist/challenge being positioned as the “other”. For example, in the process of resisting being “othered”, the wheelchair racers “othered” those whom they regarded as different from themselves (athletes with severe impairments). In fact, those who participate in “disability sports” were not considered to be “real” athletes by the interviewees, basically because athletes with severe impairments and their performances were not consistent with dominant cultural notions of what sport is and should be about. Consequently, the interviewees did not identify themselves as disabled athletes. Instead, they worked hard at identifying themselves as wheelchair racers, not disabled, at differentiating themselves from the category of disabled athletes. The empirical data illustrate how they created hierarchies of disability in the process of distancing themselves from “disabled” athletes. This process illustrates how the disabled athletes are objected and sent to the margin by the interviewees. However, as the interviewees too are by definition “disabled”, this strategy reproduces rather than challenges the able-bodied norm, which might keep them in a disempowered position. On the other hand, the disabling processes in wheelchair racing can also be liberating to the subject. Although ability is at the centre of sport and physical activity, the interviewees in several cases crossed boundaries in sport and particularly those between ability and disability. For instance, they actively constructed their own bodies and the meanings attached to them from being socially marked as “disabled” to being strong and able through participation in sport. In that sense, they claimed access to the sport discourse and thus demanded that wheelchair racing should be put on an equal footing with other elite sports. Furthermore, the discourse of able-ism seems to affect the gendering process in many ways. For instance, the female wheelchair racers seem to struggle with both the oppression of being female racers in a male dominated sport and the oppression of being disabled in a sport context dominated by the able-bodied
norms and standards. In general, the interviewees seem to construct themselves as gendered beings in relation to dominating notions and expectations of masculinity and femininity.

Finally, this analysis suggests how particular social notions and expectations of gender and disability in contemporary society are reproduced, but most importantly, resisted and deconstructed among male and female wheelchair racers in Sweden today. Consequently, these findings make it difficult to understand disabled people as a homogeneous gender-neutral social group, primarily as gender and disability operate as sources of differential experiences within the meaning-making process from which athletes, like any other human beings, construct and practice their identities.

References
How wheelchair athletes challenge the discourse of able-ism


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