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## **The Multi-Dimensional Influence of a Sports Activity on the Process of Psycho-Social Rehabilitation and the Improvement in the Quality of Life of Persons with Physical Disabilities**

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**Abstract** Purpose: The purpose of the research is to analyze the role that sport plays in the lives of persons with physical disabilities within the process of rehabilitation and the improvement of their quality of life.

Background: The article raises the notions of changes that take place in the life of a physically handicapped person which is due to their engagement in a sports activity. In the article, I refer to the subjective perspective of those researched, rendering their own point of view into the major subject of analysis.

Methods: Qualitative data are exploited in the research, collected through a technique of unstructured interviews and undisguised observations conducted among the disabled practicing sports.

Findings: The role of sport practiced by the disabled has been determined within several contexts, which were distinguished within the course of the research as analytical categories.

Conclusion: On the basis of the research it was found that getting involved in a sports activity is significant within the process of experiencing life satisfaction, personal development and the reconstruction of the ego, self-identity, and transformations in the manner of perceiving both themselves and others. Therefore, a sports activity of a disabled person supports the rehabilitation process effectively.

**Keywords** Physical Activity; People with Disabilities; Life Changes; Self-Perception; Personal Experiences; Qualitative Research

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## Introduction and Theoretical Background

The sport of disabled individuals has its beginnings in the previous century, and its development was especially influenced by newly established organizations whose aim was to direct and manage various forms of activating people with psycho-physical dysfunctions. Over the course of several years, both the conditions and possibilities according to which disabled people had to practice sport have changed, and other events that accompanied that process determined a gradual transformation from rehabilitation, through recreation, to extreme sports (Molik, Morgulec-Adamowicz, and Kosmol 2006:63). This course of the development of disabled sport is continued in its current comprehension. On the one hand, it is allocated to the broadly-understood process of rehabilitation and, on the other hand, it is an integral discipline of physical culture. Therefore, the sport of the disabled may take various forms, starting with rehabilitation sport, through recreation-amateur, to extreme sports.

Regardless the manner and character of the sporting activity of the disabled, it is assumed that it is a specific type of activity, related not only to corporeality but also to “being a social phenomenon, which is ascribed with certain meaning and which is perceived by a given community in a particular manner” (Heinemann 1989:238). As emphasized by Klaus Heinemann (1989:239), sport is “a result of circumstances which are frameworks for actions and decisions which include elements of social acceptance and patterns to follow, life experiences, and individual and social identity.”

Sport understood in such a manner is close to the category of *action*, which is placed in the center of the theoretical assumption of symbolic interactionism that constitutes the theoretical framework for these deliberations. Here, an action is composed of activities undertaken by particular individuals that interact with themselves and with one another (Blumer 1969:69-71). Therefore, the nature of social reality is of a processual dimension, which is changeable and dynamic (Blumer 1969; Prus 1999). When it comes to individuals, they do not reproduce the schemes of actions, but respond creatively and adjust to a given situation and circumstances (Charmaz 2000). An action has the nature of a behavior construed by a human being, not its response that results from particular external factors that do not depend on the individual himself/herself (such as physiological stimuli, drives, needs, feelings, attitudes, norms, values, etc.). A human’s response to the desires, feelings, and actions of others, and their requirements or expectations towards them, is not passive, but conscious, using their ego and mind (Blumer 1969:52).

People who interact with one another, who communicate, thus provide the basis for the construction of a real and intersubjective world of people endowed with the sense of their own ego. Here, individuals are active and fully aware actors, acting on the basis of meanings ascribed to objects, therefore co-creating reality, and not reacting passively and lifelessly to external stimuli (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007).

Hence, symbolic interactionists are inclined to perceive people as active social actors who reconstruct

a picture of the surrounding reality and of their place in the life space imagined in that way, continuously and during interactions with other members of a given community. Robert Prus and Scott Grills (2003:19) believe that symbolic interaction—as perceived by interactionists—“may be seen as an examination of ways in which people provide their life situation with meaning and devote themselves to activity in relationships with others.”

As concluded by Herbert Blumer (1969:51), “the process of interacting with oneself places a human being towards the world and not within it, this causing the need to deal with it through the process of defining, not simply responding.” However, in order to become an object for oneself, we first need to become an object for others. By adopting a metaphorical comparison, we can say that we need a mirror in the form of other people, the reflection of which will allow us to take on their roles (Krzemiński 1986:47).

Concepts formulated in such a manner affect the essence of the social constructivism perspective,<sup>1</sup> according to which people perceive reality through the prism of their cultures and experiences, ascribing what they see with specific meanings. At the same time, nobody is capable of observing an objective reality, detached from imposed meanings and concepts. What defines the world as the socio-cultural reality is, first of all, the various premises of

human activity, actions, and also processes, events, interpretations, and values—but not objects, things, or facts (Wendland 2011:23).

Taking into account the above mentioned theoretical references, in the research that this paper is based on, I refer to the subjective perspective of the researched individuals, making their own point of view a basis for the construction of theoretical generalizations (Włodarek and Ziółkowski 1990:55). The research is intended to identify meaning in the experiences of ordinary people, thus answering the following questions: How is the experience—in this case, practicing sport—provided with meaning? And, how is it defined, interpreted, understood, expressed, and embodied? Therefore, I would like to put forward a preliminary thesis that sport may exert influence in two directions. On the one hand, it may change the social image of a disabled person through presenting the disabled in a manner different from stereotypes. On the other hand, and the one which constitutes the subject of my research interests, it may change a disabled person's life definition, first of all, in the matter of perceiving himself/herself as a fully-entitled member of a given community (Corbin and Strauss 1985). Hence, practicing sport may be treated as an activity which triggers transformation, from a disabled person accepting—according to the social perception, often of a stereotypical nature—the imposed manner of the interpretation of reality, to rejection and acceptance of a new set of definitions, where previous ways of perceiving himself/herself are reformulated (Charmaz 1983). Disability becomes an element of an individual's life that is possible to be accepted, attracting just the attention of the disabled person who is now

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<sup>1</sup> The term constructivism is ascribed to all those approaches in the sociology of scientific knowledge (Zybertowicz 1999) that research scientific development as a result of social operations, and thus they do not assume that scientific knowledge reflects an independent reality or results from the application of historically unchanged principles of research conduct (Amsterdamska 1992:137).

capable of moving from a passive to an active attitude (Williams 2000).

Therefore, in a later part of the article, I will make some attempts to determine the fields and contexts of disabled people's lives that host qualitatively significant transformations rooted in their sports activity. To grasp their complex and holistic character, I will focus on functions that may be ascribed to practicing sport by people with an acquired disability, and the meaning for the general well-being of an individual.

## Methods

### Data Collection

The research material applied in this study encompasses personal experiences of disabled people, realizing their physical activity through participation in various forms of sport. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of this category of disabled people. Questions posed in the interviews covered topics such as the role and meaning of the researched people's participation in institutionalized forms of sporting activities. By applying triangulation of data, the study also applied some records from participant observations made during meetings and sport events, training sessions, and consultations (Adler and Adler 1994). The research was performed between 07/2013 and 12/2014 across Poland, in training centers devoted to and adjusted to the needs of the disabled. While starting to develop this text, the empirical material comprised 47 interviews and 23 records from observations (as of 01 September, 2015). The interviews

were performed with 20 women and 27 men between 16 and 50 years old. The interviews were carried out with physically disabled individuals (taking into account all types of bodily dysfunctions, excluding the deaf and intellectually disabled). The group of respondents included individuals who represented the following sport disciplines: athletics (running, long jump, high jump, javelin, shot put), table tennis, sitting volleyball, goalball, wheelchair rugby, and wheelchair basketball. The interviews usually lasted from 40 to 120 minutes. Before analysis, the interviews were transcribed word-for-word, preserving the details of the interviewees' utterances as faithfully as possible.

### Ethical Considerations

The participants were assured that all information provided would be treated with anonymity and confidentiality, and pseudonyms are used throughout (see: Saunders, Kitzinger, and Kitzinger 2014; 2015 for details regarding the anonymizing strategy). All participants gave written informed consent before participating. All quotations cited are in the participants' own words. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### Data Analysis

Data analysis was an iterative constant comparative process involving descriptive and interpretive analyses (Miles and Huberman 1994; Patton 2001). The analysis of the research material is performed in accordance with the procedures of grounded theory. Data analysis involved open coding and axial coding. All interviews were encoded with open

coding. Afterwards, with the application of axial coding, the codes were ordered and selected, leading to the generation of the most significant analytical categories, revealing the complex relationship between them. As a result, ten key themes were distinguished, which reflected the main contexts of physical activity of the disabled, in the scope of their psycho-social rehabilitation and improvement of quality of life. Later, the article describes three levels of influence of sport practiced by a disabled person on how they perceived themselves and their life situation. As a consequence, this allowed the question to be answered about the mechanisms of sport's influence on a disabled person's life which improve their quality of life.

The research used interviews performed with physically disabled people. The main criterion of selection was acquisition of disability in adult life (i.e., from the moment when a person becomes 16 years old) and practicing sport (for at least one year). The selection of subsequent cases for the research was of a theoretical character (*theoretical sampling*), based on the constant comparative method. Thanks to theoretical sampling, the researcher, while collecting, encoding, and analyzing the materials, makes simultaneous decisions about where and what data to collect (Glaser and Strauss 1967). While applying the constant comparative method in the search for other data, the researcher makes an attempt to choose cases that are both highly diverse and similar to each other, to understand the maximum number of conditions differentiating the presence of categories and their mutual correlations (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Such a manner of performance resulted in people repre-

senting various kinds of physical disability being part of the researched sample. There were people with quadri- and paraplegia, spastic paralysis, and those with amputated legs. The selection of cases lasted until the theoretical saturation of the generated analytical categories was achieved.

The data analysis was supported by CAQDAS—*Computer Assisted/Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software*. The work on the analysis-conceptual level was carried out with the NVivo 11 program, which supported the process of ordering and sorting the data, creating categories, and developing hypotheses and constructing an integrating diagram (Lonkila 1995; Richards 1999).

### **Assurance of Quality**

I followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) principles of trustworthiness, as well as Charmaz's (2000) validity guidelines for grounded theory. Theoretical saturation, constant comparative analysis, trustworthiness, and validity checks provided assurance of data quality and rigor (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

### **Results**

The research results suggest that sport presents a hugely significant life activity of a disabled individual. It allows an individual to influence his/her situations in a multi-dimensional and multi-threaded manner. For disabled people, sport is significant within the process of experiencing life satisfaction, personal development and reconstruction of the ego, self-identity and transformations in the manner of perceiving both themselves and others.



Based on the performed analyses, the author succeeded in identifying three levels of influence of sport practiced by a disabled person on how they perceive themselves and their life situation. The first one is related to the notion of the body and the transformations that take place in the bodily sphere of an individual, through their sports activity. The second aspect refers to the broadly understood interpersonal relations of a disabled person with their surroundings, shaped as a result of practicing sport. The third aspect is connected to the problems of subjectivity of a disabled person, which is reconstructed as a result of experiences arising from practicing sport and the accompanying transformations of the process of perceiving themselves and their life situation.

### **(Psycho-)Physical and Body Transformations**

The first aspect that was mentioned, which may be called psycho-physical, is related to the process of discovering the possibilities of their body, therefore of exploring it again. In this context, practicing sport makes a disabled person start to pay more attention to their corporeality, which causes their body awareness to improve. Sport allows them to overcome their shame, the feeling of embarrassment resulting from their disabled body, because it requires a person to present themselves publicly and to show themselves in a manner that usually deprives them of the attributes that hide the dysfunction (e.g., prosthesis or clothes). Therefore creating a basis for a new perspective of perceiving themselves. This is somehow forced by practicing sport, through experiencing their body, accompanying the situation of making the dysfunction public. A sports activity

allows both the affected person and others to get accustomed to the look of a dysfunctional body, and it strengthens the process of its acceptance and overcoming the interconnected trauma.

It was not easy because, for me, as someone who was afraid of other people's looks, the fact that someone could see me without my prosthesis or the clothes that covered it was enormously difficult. I did everything so that no one could see me and my deformity just like that. It was important for me because I was afraid and ashamed of what I am, and I was worried that others would be looking strangely and judging me. So, when I had to undress and take my prosthesis off for the training for the first time, I was really scared. But, now I know that if it hadn't been for that, I would still have a problem with normal functioning, without bigger worries that someone might see me and say something to me. [Lucy, a disabled person who practices sport]

Several key qualities may be highlighted for such a function of sport for individuals with a physical disability. The first of the discussed qualities of sport, which refers to the body transformation category and the more broadly understood physicality sphere of an individual, is brought down to an improvement of their body. In such a situation, sport is a certain kind of development, or continuation of medical rehabilitation, which brings the individual back to a specific level of capability, possible to be achieved. Thus, sport is to be comprehended here more widely, as a special liberation of a disabled person through physical activity. This liberation consists in breaking the limitations of their body, in strengthening it, and reaching an optimal level of

capability. Therefore, the person becomes more independent and self-reliant, experiencing the feeling of greater control over their life. It is significant especially in a situation when a given person, as a result of specific events (e.g., an accident or a disease), lost their previous capabilities, which disturbed their independence and self-reliance. As suggested by the respondents, in such a situation, sport provided them with a possibility to develop in numerous dimensions, it supported the improvement of physical conditions, resulting in the process of the gradual transformation of how they perceive themselves and their own bodies (Kuppers 2004).

Since I started moving, taking part in training sessions, my condition has improved significantly, I have a different attitude towards my possibilities because I feel that I can do more than in the past. This is the matter of not only my condition, but of my psyche as well, because one is strictly connected to the other. Currently, I have no bigger problems with going out, doing something, I simply feel more self-reliant than in the past. [Mark, a disabled person with a damaged motor organ]

Thus, through practicing sport, a disabled person may in some respect regain what they lost, namely, their skills and physical abilities, that is, agility, which thanks to the sports activity may improve greatly. The sports activity will not remove the body damage itself, but it is able to exert a positive influence on its performance and general condition, and to strengthen those spheres of the body that may, to some extent, take control over the dysfunctional areas. This is the manner in which the whole body becomes stronger and, thanks to regular exercise,

such a person becomes more capable, and they are characterized with greater coordination of movement and higher control over their body. In numerous cases, an individual may achieve such a level of ability which provides them with great autonomy and freedom, as a consequence limiting their dependence on other people. Therefore, the person becomes more independent, experiencing the feeling of greater control over their life. This is proven by the following quote from one of the respondents:

For me, sport is the route for freedom, for being myself, and staying independent. You know, it's like, thanks to me being active, my general physical condition improved greatly, and I'm much fitter...And, thanks to that I can do more now than I could before, I mean, I generally am in a better physical and mental condition, and how to say that, well, um...I feel better in my own skin [laughter]. [John, a disabled person who practices sport]

Sport, especially for a person with acquired disability, may pose one of the first fields of their activity where they are able to feel joy, satisfaction, and escape from mundane matters for at least a moment. Sport may become a real opportunity for a given person to abandon their everyday routine, and a platform to develop the feeling of having a bond with others. Hence, we have another quality within the discussed category, which is identifying sport as a way of releasing emotions and treating this activity as a source of fun.

I feel really great when I come here. It is the best way to switch off and take a deep breath for me. When I'm so tired, I feel that other issues, which are a burden,

leave me. And, when I leave here, I paradoxically have more power to get through another day. [Tom, a disabled individual with an amputated leg]

Therefore, sport becomes a certain “escape” from the everyday life of a disabled person, where an individual finds a source of joy and is able to forget, or, what is most important, it enables them to find themselves in other spheres of life and support them to find courage in various, non-sport situations.

Sport often becomes the main or the only activity of a person. Then, it is ascribed with the highest rank, becoming the center of life of a given person, around whom all of their other tasks are focused. It is a situation when a disabled person acquires a possibility which could be unavailable if they were fully able. It is especially visible when sport becomes a professional activity, because then it provides the disabled individual with completely new perspectives. There are various trips, participation in training camps and consultations, but also scholarships and money prizes for the best sportsmen, which allows even greater involvement of such an individual in practicing sport. However, this refers to a “handful” of the best sportsmen (usually called to national representation), and the majority of individuals are unable to provide for themselves through sports practicing.

At first, it was just a form of fun for me, and even earlier—a form of rehabilitation. Besides, it’s still like sport is both a form of rehabilitation and fun. And I hope it stays this way, because I’d really want to be in better and better shape, and to derive fun from what I do. But, of course, if you treat sport professionally, it’s

something more, because the requirements are different. First of all, you need to be disciplined, and expect a lot from yourself. This is the only way you can think about any career and achieving a position that matters. [Harry, a disabled individual who practices extreme sports]

But, sport may become a significant activity of a given person, also in a situation when it is not treated professionally but in a purely recreational and amateur fashion. In this case, it plays the role of a hobby, which the remaining activities and actions of an individual are focused around. For a lot of them, the fact they are physically active despite their disability is a prize in itself. Some of the interviewees emphasized that training sessions, as well as the self-discipline that accompanies sport, provide an important component in the process of organizing their everyday issues, and the strive for the best results determines their place not only in sport but also in life.

At present, sport is the most important thing for me. I feel that it is my time and I need to use it as much as I can. Time is passing and I still have so much to do. These are my ambitious goals, and I want to realize them. [Tom, a disabled person with an amputated leg]

Practicing sport in the aspect related to the psycho-physical transformation may also lead to overcoming worries arising from coming out as a disabled person. Some individuals believe that they would not be accepted and they would not find any understanding among able-bodied individuals. This means that they are unable to reveal their disability to other people (they hide and mask it), at the same



time being afraid of exposure. It also refers to situations when a disabled person has a feature which is impossible to hide (e.g., they are in a wheelchair, they cannot use a prosthesis, etc.), which means that the anxiety against the environment, the lack of acceptance leads them to avoid contact with others and thus to self-exclusion. Both of the mentioned situations are reflected in Goffman's (1963) vision of stigma. Invisible in the first case and impossible to be hidden from the environment in the second. They also both mean that a disabled person makes every effort to avoid the exhibition of their disability or exposure to its unavoidable publicity. At the same time, it was found that both the first and the second category of people may experience similar adjusting difficulties, as well as similar successes in the realization of sport, business, scientific, and other careers (Willis, Fabian, and Hendershot 2005).

Therefore, the presence of sport in a disabled person's life often causes a person to overcome their barriers, as it pushes them to expose their disability.

I doubt we would have talked earlier. I didn't want to show myself, I didn't want people to know that I'm disabled. Not until I started running did I begin to look differently at the opinions of others. I now wonder whether I should show myself to people from my town, so there are no doubts or uncertainties that it is as it is, and that I am who I am. [John, a disabled person with an amputated leg]

A disabled person who gets involved in practicing sport needs to face the necessity to present themselves to others in numerous cases, in a manner which leads to the exposure of their—often hid-

den—dysfunction. It usually takes place with the presence of other disabled individuals, and gradually in the broader public context. All of this means that a disabled person becomes more open and ready to take up other—increasingly more demanding—challenges.

### **Transformations in Interpersonal Relationships**

The second analytical category related to physically disabled individuals practicing sport, identified within the analysis of the collected material, refers to the sphere of the interactions of that person with their environment. This category is connected with the possibility of cognition, thanks to their involvement in the sports activity, of other, often previously unknown people, who frequently start to play an important role in the disabled person's life. It happens because the disabled person who takes up the sports activity not only improves their physical conditions but they also develop their motor skills. Additionally, through establishing and maintaining social interactions, they become an active actor within the specific social relations. Sport is a form of activity of the disabled which creates an arena for certain interactions between its participants, and which encompasses numerous social actors. The intensification of such relationships, realized within the environment of disabled people who practice sport, supports the process of developing interpersonal relationships and creates a bond among particular people.

Right, actually, thanks to being in a club [sports club] I met a lot of people, and actually I am close to them, at least some of them. And I must admit that I cannot

imagine a different situation now, but it has not always been so. In this way, without any exaggeration, I can say that when I started to come to the training sessions, my social life flourished. [Katy, a disabled individual, practicing recreational sport]

A disabled person compares their social position with that of others, resulting in their identification with people of a similar level of relative privilege or disability, and the adaption of their attitudes and patterns of behavior. Hence, the individual agrees to plans of actions, and permanently reinterprets their reality through interactions with its members, leading to a discussion with oneself. Thanks to those interactions and specific auto-narrations, he/she obtains a key to interpreting his/her place in the world, and he/she sees things that should be done in a given situation (Mead 1934).

At the same time, the repeating of an interaction with the same social actors, in the same situation, results in a reconstruction of the definition of "self," both of themselves and of their partners, which is not limited to a particular situation. The process of acquiring identity by a social actor takes place during interactions where the anticipated visions of the self, of the subject, are confirmed or modified, therefore influencing subsequent actions taken by the interaction's participants. This is the basis on which a belief regarding both the individual and their partners is created, which becomes significant in various aspects of the individual's life (Turner 2002).

As long as I can remember, I have always had a problem accepting myself, that I'm different than most

of my peers. My parents did everything to help me so I did not feel this way. But, despite that, I have always had this feeling that I'm different, and everyone who knows about it treats me in such a way, meaning, differently than they would treat someone that is completely healthy. So, when a chance arose to try sport, I was very skeptical at first. I thought, "What do I need it for?" But, gradually, as I started trying, I found out quickly that it makes some sense because I feel better, and not only physically. I simply see myself differently than I used to. [Charlie, a disabled person practicing sport]

Another quality of the *transformations in interpersonal relationships* category is related to *sport as a source of support and the search for a reference group*. In this meaning, the environment in which a sport activity may take place is a source of support, enhancing a unit mentally through bringing together people with similar problems, but it also is a field of exchange and sharing everyday problems with others. The issues that may be solved within a group usually go far beyond the sphere of sport, referring to aspects of personal hygiene or formalities with various agendas or institutions. The group members obtain practical knowledge that helps them in solving current problems related to their everyday lives. Such a group also allows them to distance themselves from run-of-the-mill issues for a moment and focus on a completely different activity.

I couldn't pull myself together after the accident. I had a problem for a long time to find my place. Nothing was the same anymore, but I also wasn't aware how it should be now. Actually, only when I started coming to training, when I met my new friends who

have similar dilemmas as I do, did it all start to fall into place. [Alan, a disabled person with an amputated hand]

Hence, participation in a given environment is interconnected with adaptation to the present rules, but also the internalization of particular values. A disabled person becomes a part of a given community, one which starts playing an increasingly important role in their lives. In this context, also the notion of a reference group may be applied as a comparative scheme, in relation to which people make basic judgments and evaluations regarding their social position. It also provides measures and criteria that allow them to determine their social position, which constitutes a basis for the development of the self-esteem of an individual. It also happens in the case of the disabled who get involved in practicing sport. Sport often leads to both an increase in the frequency of contacts with others, but it also supports the search for patterns to follow and the development of bonds between the group members.

Actually, since I had this opportunity and since I've been going to the sport classes, I look at many issues differently. I think that the people who come here with me also have this impact on me, so I now see various issues differently. And also when I see how others behave, how they speak about various cases, about mundane things. I think, I start thinking about and doing many things differently. I simply learn from them, and this is how I change myself. [Mary, a disabled person practicing sport]

Sport of the disabled may be treated as specific areas where both the individual and the whole soci-

ety of the disabled acquire the possibility to present themselves to others in the brightest light, therefore showing that despite some body dysfunctions they are not only self-reliant and independent but they may also successfully carry out various actions and realize themselves in every field of a social life. Therefore, sport creates conditions not only to promote the activity of the disabled but also to support the integration process of the fully able-bodied and disabled individuals. This is supported by various events, especially those promoted by media, that is, of the highest international rank, such as the Paralympic Games. However, integration through sport may also take place on a smaller, although still significant, local scale, and refer to the residents of a given region or town. Such a result is achieved at meetings of disabled sportsmen with students, when it is possible to present their skills and integrate through playing together.

I treat it in such a way that when I do something, I don't do it just for myself. Of course, I do my best to derive some benefits, but I think that's normal. But, apart from that, I simply want to give something from myself, and somehow show it to others that as a disabled person I'm not so resourceless or demanding care...and that other disabled individuals can also do much more, and they are more capable than it may seem. [Harry, a disabled individual practicing extreme sports]

Disabled sportsmen, thanks to successes and their exposure in the media, work actively to the benefit of preventing social exclusion of the whole category of these citizens. They also play a significant role in the fight for equal rights and equal treatment

of all disabled individuals. It is worth highlighting here that the disabled sportsmen who practice sport professionally take up a certain fight with the stereotype, which consists not only in making it public but even exposing their dysfunctional bodies, which might be perceived by others as unaesthetic, deprived of functional assets, or simply as “broken,” hence believed to be synonymous with weakness, sickness, and, to put it simply, the opposite of a healthy body.

I believe that what I do, I also do for others. The first thing is that my relatives are happy with it, and the second is that I can show to others that the disabled, like me, may do different things, and despite being disabled they're not cripples. [John, a disabled person with an amputated leg]

Sport may be treated as a means to an end, providing, in fact, a kind of bridge between physical activity and other kinds of life activity of a disabled person. It means that, for an individual, sport may provide a source of inspiration, but also of the creation of an internal power which stimulates them to become active in other fields of life. It often means greater openness to new experiences of such a person, which in turn supports life progress, both in the private and public spheres. In the first aspect, it, first of all, refers to becoming capable of establishing relationships with other people, and developing closer contacts, frequently leading to long-lasting partnerships. On the other hand, the courage and self-esteem derived from a sport activity mean that an individual starts to present a more assertive attitude in various relations of everyday life, which is highly significant in the context of professional

work, among others. As a result, it leads to the reconstruction of life goals and priorities. This was proved by the interviewees themselves, who highlighted that, in numerous cases, practicing sport and the feeling that they are able to do what they did not expect as disabled individuals supported the positive thinking about themselves and their possibilities.

I believe that the fact that I started to practice sport, that I found myself here, is one of the best things that could have happened to me. After the accident, I was withdrawn, depressed, deprived of the sense of life. Only by other people pulling me out and showing me that something can be done despite the disability, made me believe in myself. It happened that this is the place where I found myself [on the range], and it helped me to pull myself together. [Dan, a disabled person with a defective motor organ]

Another aspect of practicing sport discussed in the article is the fight with stereotypes and the possibility of proving to others that they are worthy individuals despite their disability. This is related to the reconstruction of the social image of a disabled person, which becomes transformed through the sport activity. In this light, sport enables a disabled person to be presented as a strong, courageous, self-reliant individual, therefore negating the broad and stereotypical perception of people with various dysfunctions by the remaining part of the society. Through their actions, a dysfunctional person breaks with the previous image of a disabled individual, which is often connected with negative features including, among others, helplessness, dependability, or reliance on others.

You know, it's fun when people who watch me say afterwards, "Wow, it was great, I didn't know you could do that." Then, I feel that I have proved that the disabled can do much more than many people think. [Ben, a disabled person with a defective motor organ]

Thanks to practicing sport and the possibility of healthy people observing the actions of the disabled, the image of a disabled individual—previously ascribed with various, usually negative features through repeated stereotypes—is somehow dismantled. Physical activity in the case of the disabled means not only caring about the improvement of their conditions and general health condition but it also leads to overcoming barriers, both those connected with their own body and psyche and, what is more important, with social stereotypes and prejudices.

This is related to all categories of disabled individuals involved in various sport activities. On the one hand, it includes people who practice extreme sports, who, through spectacular victories within the international arena, propagate sport of the disabled and show them in a manner that is completely different from the consolidated stereotypes. On the other hand, there are also those who practice sport as amateurs, due to improvement of their physical, mental, and social condition, often start their society-oriented activity which consists in promoting their environment and disabled people in general. Therefore, it needs to be assumed that every kind of sport has a potential which may be used in the effective prevention of social exclusion and marginalization of the disabled.

## **Transformations in One's Subjectivity and the Sense of Self**

The third aspect of sports activities of the disabled, relating to the improvement in their quality of life, is connected with regaining the feeling that they are treated as a subject in relationships with others. In regaining the feeling of subjectivity, a significant role is played by the perception of a disabled individual through the prism of their active lifestyle, and the observation of developing perspectives and possibilities of realizing various life plans. In this context, sport supports a disabled individual in both the process of reconstructing the image of self and identifying oneself in new conditions arising from the experienced dysfunction. Hence, it is about noticing the assets of sport, and using them to prove to oneself and to others that living the life of a disabled person may be meaningful and may bring feelings of joy. It is both important and hard to achieve because it also means overcoming and challenging social stereotypes, according to which a disabled person is passive, demanding, and unhappy. However, it, first of all, transfers the load in the set of definitions of the self from a disabled person to perceiving the self as a sportsman (which is actually a social synonym of capability). In this context, there is a possibility to distinguish the ego at the "I" level (subjective I) and at the "me" level (objective "me"). The differentiation of the two aspects of the ego, introduced by Mead, means that, in the first case, we deal with a reaction to the attitudes of others, and they are impulsive and creative forces hidden within the individual responsible for the picture of the self. The second case refers to an organized collection of attitudes towards the individual, which is shaped on the basis of how we are



seen by others, and what they expect from us (Mead 1934). As a result, the reconstruction at the "I" level takes place, which consists in proving to themselves that disability should not be unambiguously associated with tragedy. In this process, the key meaning is played by sport, which provides an array of justifications that confirm the position.

Sport plays a really significant role in my life. To tell you the truth, I think I'd be a completely different person if it wasn't for sport, um...meaning, a weaker one, more withdrawn and susceptible to the views of other people. Sport taught me how to be self-confident, I became more sociable, and I'm not afraid of others, which used to make my life much harder. [Ralf, a disabled person practicing sport]

Together with the improvement of the physical condition of the disabled, a slow transformation at the level of their ego takes place. Disabled people, thanks to practicing sport and observing the changes in their body, gain a greater feeling of self-control and, most importantly, the belief that they are able to break other barriers. All positive experiences related to practicing sport by a disabled person strengthen their belief in the growing potential to act and use their body effectively, which, as a consequence, allows them to reproduce a positive self-evaluation. This, in turn, means that other mental barriers, which burdened the individual no less than the physical limitation, making it impossible to take up other life activities, are gone.

Well, sport gives me much more than just the fact of the improvement of my condition. To tell you the

truth, I feel much better thanks to it, in a mental respect. I have more power to live. If I manage to do something here, at training, I feel that everything else will also succeed, and it will be OK. [Anna, a disabled person in a wheelchair]

Therefore, sport is not just a physical strengthening of the body. First of all, sport is a source of transformation at the level of how disabled people perceive themselves. Such a transformation may, on the one hand, result from the changes with the body and its improving fitness observed by the individual, but, on the other hand, it may also be connected with the increasing awareness of a given person regarding the manner in which they are perceived by other people. In the first case, we deal with a situation when a disabled person, while experiencing their body, is able to point out the advantageous changes that have occurred in their body thanks to the sports activity. In the second case, it is about the individual's interpretation of signals that are sent out by other people, and which provide an answer to the changes that take place in the individual thanks to practicing sport. Such reactions of the environment are a very strong stimulus for the disabled person, strengthening their self-esteem, and providing a significant source in the process of rebuilding a positive image of themselves.

Right, I've already said that, for me, sport is space for discovering myself, the one I was, and because of that, in hindsight, I think I wasted a lot. Sport, and everything I achieve through sport, is all to do with physical strength, vital power, but also, or maybe essentially, contact with others, and what I believe is the

most important aspect, the possibility to see myself in a more reflective and possibly realistic manner than before. [Ralf, a disabled person practicing sport]

What is more, sport provides a possibility to compensate for losses related to the lost opportunities, or the necessity to change life plans and aspirations of a given person. In sport, an individual may find a substitute source of self-realization and the feeling of self-fulfillment. It is significant, especially when a person was active before they lost their full capability, and because of the dysfunction they cannot fully realize themselves in the manner that they had done before the event that caused the disability. The phenomenon may be related to situations that are completely unconnected with the individual's previous activity (e.g., work in the garden, horse riding, etc.), but it can also be a certain form of continuation in a slightly altered version of other forms of practicing sport. In the latter case, it is especially visible in the case of people who were previously focused on sport and often treated in a professional manner.

After the accident, I thought it was the end, that I shouldn't count on it, that, for me, sport was history. As an able-bodied person, I actually knew nothing about sport of the disabled. Who would think that sport of the disabled would be a place of my greatest successes in the future. [Alan, a disabled person with a defective motor organ]

Therefore, sport develops a feeling of self-esteem in the disabled. It supports the feeling of self-sufficiency in their life and the feeling of control in a manner they are keen to experience. It is especially significant in a situation when a person—having become

disabled—loses one's feeling of self-esteem, but also the sense for a future life, and that they are unable to control it from now on. In such situations, practicing sport, especially when it brings visible results in the form of the improvement of their physical condition, but also greater efficiency in dealing with various, also non-sport situations of everyday life, rebuilds their self-confidence, and is accompanied by moving from a fatalist to an active attitude.

## Conclusion

On the basis of the performed research and analysis of the collected material, it may be concluded that a disabled person who takes up physical activity starts to strive for an improvement in their physical condition and gets an opportunity to take part in actions of individuals with similar life problems. Therefore, the state of mind of an individual changes, as he/she starts to perceive oneself and the surrounding world differently. This process is accompanied by positive emotions, which are reflected in the whole life of the individual, strengthening them mentally through certain experiences which result from psycho-social processes. Looking from the perspective of an improvement in the quality of life of physically disabled people allows us to determine the importance of sports activity of an individual, as it adapts a special significance and becomes a source of attitudes, behaviors, and actions, both of the individual and other people, in various, also non-sport, contexts of everyday life. Sport may lead not only to physical and fitness changes but also to those referring to transformations in the manner of how the disabled perceive themselves. Sport is a form of rehabilitation of an individual which exerts a compre-

hensive and multi-dimensional influence, combining the progress of physical fitness and an increase in mental or social rewards.

Sport is, most of all, seen as an expansion and thus a continuation of the broadly understood concept of rehabilitation. But, sport is not only a physical but, first of all, a social activity. It happens as participation in various forms of physical activity, including sport, often adapts a form of organized actions. These actions are usually carried out in clubs, associations, foundations, and unions, et cetera, and this is where it has a more or less institutionalized character—which it conditions through formal (legal) requirements, but also with practical solutions related to the possibility of acquiring funds for the operation of such entities, among others.

The sport activity of the disabled, as a consequence, is of an institutionalized and group character. Therefore, participation of the disabled in organized forms of physical activity provides a basis for their consolidation around a given problem. Despite the fact that there are numerous differences related to the material situation, support from relatives, or social status, regardless of the differences of social, economic, or cultural habitus, the members of a group experience consolidation around a common physical activity, that is, practicing sport. A basis for such actions in the case of disabled individuals is the willingness to improve their shape, but also a possibility to establish and maintain interpersonal relationships with others, and hence to participate in social life to a greater extent.

Hence, participation in a given group is interconnected with adapting to the present rules, but also

internalizing particular values. Therefore, a disabled person becomes a part of this group, and this starts to play an increasingly important role in their lives. In this context, the notion of a *reference group* may also be applied, as a comparative scheme, in relation to which people make basic judgments and evaluations regarding their social position.

Along with the increase in the group's significance for a disabled individual, we deal with the gradual process of *taking up the role of a member*. During interactions, social actors strive to legitimize their role and confirm the role played by others. If successful, the role is a basis for further interactions between the individuals. This means that a given person gets the feeling, but also the belief that the activity, in this case, sport, undertaken in a group, provides a part of his/her social identification, also recognized by people from outside of the group. This influences the perception of self as a group member. As a result, a social bond emerges. It is assumed in interactive sociology that a social bond is a product of human interactions, and it is created and reconstructed permanently.

A group where a bond between its members emerges is a support environment, but also a *field of exchanging* and sharing everyday problems with others. Matters that can be dealt with within a group usually go far beyond the sphere of sport, referring to the aspects of personal hygiene or settling matters with various agendas and in different institutions, et cetera. Therefore, the group members obtain practical knowledge, which helps them in solving current problems regarding everyday life.

Taking up an action that includes practicing sports within a given group leads to a gradual change in how an individual perceives the surrounding reality. Such positive strengthening, created thanks to building group bonds, as well as possibilities to show the immediate environment that one is a functional unit, is, on the one hand, an important resource for implementing one's life plans, and, on the other hand, it supports *self-acceptance*. Within the group, the individual agrees on action plans, and permanently reinterprets the reality in interactions with its members.

Finally, repeated interaction with the same social actors, in the same situations, results in a *reconstruction of the definition of "self,"* both of themselves and of their partners, which is not limited to one par-

ticular situation. The process of acquiring identity by a social actor takes place during interactions where the anticipated visions of self, of the subject, are confirmed or modified, therefore affecting subsequent actions undertaken by the participants of the interaction. This is the basis on which a belief regarding both the individual and their partners is created, and which becomes significant in various aspects of the individual's life, including those outside the group.

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