

**Jakub Niedbalski**  
University of Lodz

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## The Role of Sport in the Reconstruction Process of the Identity of a Person With an Acquired Body Dysfunction

**Abstract** The article raises the notions of the changes that take place in the lives of physically disabled people which are caused by their engagement in a sports activity. In the article, I will attempt to prove that practicing sport may create advantageous conditions for self-discovery and self-acceptance by a person with an acquired body dysfunction.

The purpose of the conducted research is to analyze the processual dimension of the transformations of a disabled person's life which take place under the influence of experiences related to practicing sport.

There is qualitative information applied in the research, collected through the techniques of in-depth free interviews and observations, conducted among disabled people who practice sport. Analysis and interpretation of the research material was performed in accordance with the procedures of grounded theory.

**Keywords** disability, body, sport, transformation, identity

**Jakub Niedbalski**, PhD in sociology, Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology and Organization of Management of the University of Lodz. He specializes in computer analysis of qualitative data, methods of qualitative research, notions of sociology of disability and of physical culture. He conducts research in the field of social and physical activation of the disabled. Author of the following books: *To live and work in a social welfare home. Sociological study of interactions between personnel and mentally disabled wards* (The

University of Lodz Publishing House, Lodz 2013), *Discovering of CAQDAS. Description of the selected computer programs supporting qualitative data analysis* (The University of Lodz Publishing House, Lodz 2013) and *Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software. Using of the NVivo and Atlas.ti in the research projects based on methodology of the grounded theory* (The University of Lodz Publishing House, Lodz 2014).

**email:** jakub.niedbalski@gmail.com

## Introduction

People who became disabled because of various circumstances need to face numerous physical, social and mental difficulties. If an accident or other event which led to the dysfunction, regardless of being willful or not, brought significant changes to the person's previous circumstances, which appeared stable, it can trigger deep, often traumatic experiences. The future of a person may depend on an instant, a split second, which will have serious consequences, exerting considerable impact on the future life of both the individual and those from their closest surroundings. This in turn causes new challenges and previously unknown problems to appear in such a person's life which they need to face. The character and type of the acquired dysfunction will influence their life to various extents. Nevertheless, they will almost always be connected with the necessity to reorganize their previous lives, to adjust to the transformed conditions and new, unexplored circumstances. However, first of all, such events have serious consequences related to the psycho-social field. They often adopt a negative character, leading to a mental imbalance of the individual. They may trigger feelings of loss, alienation or social exclusion (Major, O'Brien 2005:393-421). What is more, they cause a deep transformation in the manner of seeing themselves, which is related to the reconstruction of the previous vision of themselves and the loss of self-identification continuity.

Therefore, the process of supporting the disabled is seen as especially significant, and this includes their broad activation in various spheres of life. One such form of activation is sport, which may lead not

only to physical fitness, but also to changes in the manner in which they perceive themselves (Pieszak 2012:136). Regardless the manner and character of the sport activity of the disabled person, it is assumed that it is a specific type of action, related not only to corporeality but also "being a social phenomenon, which is ascribed with certain meanings, and which is perceived by a given community in a particular manner" (Heineman 1989:238). As emphasized by Klaus Heinemann (1989:239), sport is a result of circumstances which are a framework of actions of an individual, which include elements of social acceptance and patterns to follow, life experiences, and individual and social identity. Hence, sport may be treated as an activity of a man which leads to transformations on the "I" level of an individual, and the accompanying process of the social reconstruction of the definition of disability (Shepherd 1991:51-56).

## Identity and Change - Theoretical References and Practical Inspirations

According to Piotr Sztompka (2006:437-439), a social change is a difference between the social system status (e.g. a group, organization) in a single moment, and the condition of the system itself at a later time. Within this context, the change means transformation of one system status to another. At the same time, separate changes are interconnected and entangled. Therefore, they create a series of subsequent phases or stages of a given process, causally conditioned. The transformations may take place on various fields and in different dimensions, and they may be analyzed on various levels: macro-social (in whole societies and international systems), mezzo-social

(taking place in local communities and large organizations) and micro-social (within small groups and human attitudes).

In the article, I focus my attention on the last level, at the same time adopting a cognitive perspective of the theory of symbolic interactionism, rooted in the interpretative paradigm. The nature of the social reality is of processual dimensions here, changeable and dynamic (Blumer 2007; Prus 1999). Particular individuals do not recreate a certain scheme, they are rather creative entities. A human reacts passively to the desires, feelings and actions of others, the requirements or expectations towards them, but they do it consciously, using their ego and mind (Blumer 2007:52). People are actors here, acting on the basis of meanings ascribed to objects, therefore co-creating reality, and not reacting passively and lifelessly to external stimuli (Turner 2004:418-421; Szacki 2002:545 and further). Hence, symbolic interactionists are inclined to perceive people as active social actors who reconstruct the picture of themselves, of their surrounding reality and of the place in life space imagined in that way, continuously and during interactions with the remaining members of a given community. Continuous dynamic changes create the identity of an individual which, according to Zbigniew Bokszański (1989:12), may be determined as a collection of the concepts, justifications and beliefs of a social actor constructed towards himself and towards others.

While raising the matter of identity analysis of people who acquired disability in adulthood, I adopt – according to Andrzej Piotrowski (1998:54) – an interactional model of identity, where it is treated as “an

object, result and resource of an interaction”, connected with the mechanisms of identification and interpretation of oneself and of others in the mutual relationships of social actors. Following the words of Anselm Strauss (1959), I treat the concept of identity as an agent which serves the organization of empirical material and reflection over self-perception of those who, having acquired a disability and having “broken” the continuity of “I”, reconstruct their self-identification, where a significant role is played by their actions within the sport environment. On that basis I make an attempt to reconstruct the transformations that take place in how disabled people perceive themselves, from the moment of their identity crisis resulting from the acquisition of permanent body dysfunctions, to the time when, being influenced by experiences related to their engagement in a sports activity, order-creating transformations take place in their system of self-definition. These changes, especially in the period taking place directly after the disability arises, are connected with traumatic experiences which trigger a feeling of alienation, related both to difficulties in accepting their body and the physical and social incompatibility with the environment. Such experiences, characterized by changeability and repeatability, are called *turning points* by Anselm Strauss (1959:93). The turning points take place when an action program for life is “locked and its course is being destroyed” (Strauss 1959:93). According to the mentioned author, a turning point is a situation, or a kind of *social patterning* process, where the individual discovers – both in object and subject manner – that their previous self-references were wrong (or non-compliant with the transformed circumstances). In such a situation it is impossible to maintain the feeling of continuity, separation and self-esteem, and

the individual experiences strangeness of their own body (Golczyńska-Grondas 2014:111). Extreme cases of identity transformation are called alternation (Berger and Luckmann 1983), or conversion (Goffman 2006). Both kinds are related to the loss of their previous social world, breaking the bonds that connected them to it, and accessing the “new” world, which is accompanied by a radical transformation of the subjective reality of an individual (Golczyńska-Grondas 2014:113).

The process of transformation of the personality, called a moral carrier, has been also described by Erving Goffman. It refers to experiences connected on the one hand with separation from the previous life, from previous roles and interconnected identities, and on the other it is accompanied by adaptation techniques, which reduce tension, and tendencies for self-reflection expressed in lamentation or apologies (Goffman 2011:24). The transformation of a system of identity of a social actor frequently results from an identity crisis, triggered by processes of negative life experiences and interferences in the realization of previous identities in specific interactional systems and the interconnected feeling of incompatibility with the socio-cultural environment (Golczyńska-Grondas 2014:111). At the same time, identity transformations may be connected with elimination from the previous social world, marginalization, participation in a group deprived of meaning, experiencing of otherness or inability to accept a certain identification.

In the presented research I focus on a group of disabled people who, regarding their dysfunctions, are in numerous areas which are marginalized

and pushed out of the main sphere of social life, therefore while raising the problem of identity of this group of people, I put great emphasis on the process of stigmatization and its “identity” consequences (Golczyńska-Grondas 2014:26). Howard S. Becker (2009:183) claimed, for example, that such stigmatization “places the actor in a situation that makes it harder for him to live a normal life, therefore provoking him to ‘abnormal’ actions.” Accepting the role of a deviant and the internalization of attributes connected with the stigmatized identity may be treated as self-stigmatization. Self-stigmatization results in transformations in the individual’s self-definition arrangement, the reduction of elements of the scheme, its fragmentation, and withdrawal from certain definitions (*identity refraction*), for the sake of returning to previous identities. In the categories of Goffman’s analysis (2005), stigmatized people are characterized by *spoiled identity*, because stigmatization leads to the social exclusion of individuals regarding their features which are disqualifying in other people’s eyes. At the same time, such people try to manipulate the stigma so they can avoid or at least minimize the effects of social odium (Melchior 1990:183; Goffman 2005:41-43). On the other hand, transformations in the disabled person’s life may be of a constructive character, presenting, in fact, an example of actions that provide the individual with mental strength. The system of self-definition of a social actor is transformed, which results in the individual becoming someone different from what they used to be, perceiving and valuing themselves in another manner (Strauss 1959:91-92). Such a “new identity” is revealed in the process of identification of self and of others in the course of interactions which are related to the

physical activity and engagement of the disabled person in a sports activity – which I attempt to prove. The work on disabled people led by specialists (including physiotherapists, psychologists and therapists) and members of their closest surroundings (first of all family) is undoubtedly significant, which above all is brought down to the notions connected with fighting a real-life blow, that is, dramatic memories that accompany the situation of change (often also rapid and unexpected), resulting from traumatic events, which became a part of the individual (cf. Strauss et al. 1985). Kaja Kaźmierska, while referring to the concept of Anselm Strauss, speaks about “the effort of interpretation of one’s own biographic experiences in relation to one’s own identity, images of oneself, behaviors and undertaken activities” (Kaźmierska 2008:29). Because a person, within the biographical work process, refers to their own biography, this work is of a self-interactive character, but does not exclude the influence and participation of other people – first of all their significant others – in the course of this process (Strauss 2012:518-519).

Biographical work understood in this manner accompanies developmental crises, turning points and breaking moments of life stories caused by life circumstances, or entering new social worlds. It is emphasized that biographical work becomes “more intensive when a man undergoes difficult, unexpected situations, forcing himself to redefine identity, change the previous lifestyle”, and is of special significance in the case of people who, forced by difficult, traumatic experiences from their consciousness, are unable to deal with currently experienced dilemmas (Kaźmierska 2008:29; Strauss 2012). Biographical work creates a framework where work may take pre-

cedence over identity. As Markieta Domecka writes (2010:208-209), “a belief in possessing certain attributes means that while reconstructing one’s biography, those fragments are selected and highlighted, which confirm assumptions about oneself.”

Hence, the purpose of the performed research is to analyze the processual dimensions of transformations which take place in the life of a disabled person, which are proved by certain physical activities. The subject of my reflection is the reconstruction of the process connected with heading towards the annihilation of an identity as a result of a traumatic, trajectory experience of “acquiring disability”.

### Methodology of Research

The research material applied in this study encompasses information obtained from disabled people realizing their physical activity through participation in various forms of sport. Non-structure free interviews were conducted with representatives of this category of interlocutors. Furthermore, the studies employ notes from observations made during meetings and sport events, training sessions and consultations, as well as existing materials (including legal act, terms and conditions, statutes, chronicles).

The premises that support the selection of the abovementioned techniques arise first of all from the accepted ontological (human experiences, interpretations, knowledge, evaluations, interactions are perceived as significant interdependencies of the social reality) and epistemological assumptions (the legal manner of data generation on the basis of those ontological assumptions comprises interac-

tion, conversations with people, listening to stories and achieving access to knowledge, evaluations, impressions of individuals). Second of all, the obtained data are complete and in-depth, which complies with statements by Rubin and Rubin (1997:205) “qualitative research is applied in the case of notions that require deeper comprehension, which is served best by detailed examples and expanded narrations.” What is more, a motif for selecting the pointed qualitative methods was the need to identify “factual” manners of life, actions of units, processes of creating meaning, and therefore the desire to bring the sociological science closer to “life” and “recognition of social reality from the perspective of the subject that creates it” (Wyka 1993:34).

Analysis and interpretation of the research material was conducted in compliance with the principles of grounded theory methodology (Glaser, Strauss 1967; Glaser 1978; Strauss, Corbin 1990; Konecki 2000; Charmaz 2006; Gorzko 2008). Hence, the selection of subsequent cases for research was of a theoretical character (*theoretical sampling*), based on the constant comparative method. Thanks to theoretical sampling, a researcher while collecting, encoding and analyzing the materials, makes simultaneous decisions about where and what data to collect (Glaser 1978:49-50; Strauss, Corbin 1990:177). While applying the constant comparative method in my search for other data, I made an attempt to choose cases that are both highly varied and similar to each other, to grasp the maximum number of conditions differentiating the presence of categories and their mutual correlations (Glaser 1978:45-53, Charmaz 2009:74). Such a manner of performance resulted in people representing various kinds of physical dis-

ability being a part of the researched sample. There were people with quadri- and paraplegia, spastic paralysis and those with amputated legs. The research has been conducted since July 2013, across the whole of Poland, in centers adapted to the needs of the disabled practicing sport.<sup>1</sup> While starting to prepare this text, the empirical material was composed of: 51 interviews and 23 records from observations (as of 1 December 2014). The interviews were performed with 20 women and 27 men between 16 and 50 years old. 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. The selection of cases lasted until theoretical saturation was achieved, that is, to the moment when subsequent cases confirmed previous analytical findings (Glaser 1978:142).

Data analysis was supported by CAQDAS – *Computer Assisted/Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software*. Work on the analytical-conceptual level was performed with NVivo 9 software, which supported the process of sorting and coding data (Niedbalski 2014; Niedbalski, Ślęzak 2012:141).

### In the Face of the “New” Reality – the Experience of Disability by People With an Acquired Body Dysfunction

The surprising loss of the framework of everyday existence, which is our physical capability, causes an

<sup>1</sup> The category of disabled people who practice sport is approached widely in this paper, embracing all interlocutors whose physical activity was of a cyclical, repeatable character, lasting continuously for a period of at least one year.

individual to suffer (Melchior 1990:27). At that time we deal *with the eradication of the previous biography*, which means that a man is deprived of his previous life order, and there is a need to adopt a new attitude towards everyday matters, played roles or positions occupied in various social structures. For people who acquired their disability at a certain time of their lives, such circumstances pose particular experiences of the new reality, which the individual becomes “disabled” in. The objective results of disability are accompanied by subjective transformations in the ego sphere of the individual, and in the arrangement of categories and marks applied towards himself and other people, related to the reconstruction of the image of their previous life and themselves (Rokuszevska-Pawełek 2012:17-18). It is a process in a mental sense, connected with the development of a certain cognitive perspective. The course of this process triggers numerous factors, and its effect is a reconstructed identity of the individual (Strauss 1969). It is reflected in the words uttered by one of my interlocutors:

Unfortunately, the truth is that I was totally out of life for a certain time after the accident. I simply thought that it was the end, and nothing good would ever happen to me, that it was pointless to live. I was afraid, I was afraid that nothing would be the same as it had been, and that people would point their fingers at me. So I was afraid, I didn't believe and I was ashamed, I think it was that way. [interview No. 10]

A common theme in case of the researched individuals was that they felt depreciated in the eyes of other people, as “different” and “other”, because of their disability. All of this meant that they were unable to

get away from the feeling of shame and humiliation which they felt towards others, especially able-bodied individuals. They saw the source of their partial self-confidence in their body dysfunction. They believed that they would not be accepted, and they would not find any understanding among able-bodied individuals. Hence, it was impossible for them to reveal their disability to those people (they made every attempt to hide it), at the same time they were afraid of exposure. As a result, they were pushed to self-exclusion, which related to almost every aspect of their lives:

It was simply humiliating for me, I was afraid that someone would see me. I was a big man at one time, I had strength, others respected me, and after the accident I was unable to wipe my bottom. This was the matter that was the most disturbing for me. Not even the fact that I would need to deal with it for the rest of my life, but that the others, who remembered me as a real man, would now see a cripple, who can do nothing. [interview No. 12]

In the case of people with invisible or hardly recognized dysfunctions, prevailing were emotions related to the feelings of anxiety, threat, worries of being exposed, or their “otherness” being revealed, therefore they would acquire a label identifying them as not fully valuable. Erving Goffman determines people whose stigma is hidden as discreditable individuals. The main axis of interactive actions is focused, in their case, on dilemmas: whether, which, when, and where to reveal the stigma. Goffman claims that the most significant problem for them is to manage information about their disability properly, and questions that accompany this dilemma may be

grasped in the following form, “To reveal or not to reveal? To tell or not to tell? To give myself away or not? To lie or not to lie?” (Goffman 2005:77-78). In turn, people with a visible kind of stigma are called discredited, by Erving Goffman. Here, an individual needs to manipulate the conditions of the environment to decrease the tension connected with mutually difficult circumstances – for the individual and for those around him. The problem of manipulating the stigma depends in this case on whether the stigmatized social actor is known to the environment in a closer, more personal manner. With this kind of relationship, the people adopt a certain identity. The type and character of this identity exerts some influence on the manner of manipulating information, because the stigmatized person subordinates the application of interaction strategies to the manner in which they are perceived by others (Goffman 2005:158).

However, regardless the character of the stigma, the existence of stigmatized people, according to Erving Goffman, is determined – in almost all respects – by the society of people who identify themselves as normal (*normals*), which pertains both to the determination of a certain life sphere, and subordination to strong control, which may relate to the creation of separated enclaves of “misfits” (Goffman 2005:155). Furthermore, Goffman (1961) highlighted the fact that significant factors that decide the manner of conduct and self-identification of an individual constitute a part of social reactions. Public response to a given behavior supports not only its consolidation but it also changes the manner of defining the identity of a “stigmatized” person. According to Howard S. Becker (2009), a negative feature ascribed to a given

person becomes generalized by the environment. This in turn means that within the course of further negative stigma, an individual is inclined to identify himself with the ascribed role. Such situations were also experienced by people who took part in the research. They felt that the manner in which others had approached them somehow reflected the disability of my respondents. Hence, the environment consolidated the disabled people's belief about their “otherness”, and meant that they were unable to think about themselves in categories different than their not being fully capable:

Others did everything for me, and around me as well, because I couldn't, I had no strength, I didn't want to. I simply lay in bed staring at the ceiling. It was the end for me, I thought it would have been better if I had simply died instead of living such a life. In hindsight, I believe that they pitied me too much, they treated me like I was incapable of anything, and I think it was even more depressing for me, it took away my strength to do anything. [interview No. 7]

Despite the fact that a stigma ascribed by society is often a very strong determinant which shapes their lives, still the stigmatized individual may try to take actions which enable him to fight the feeling of social and personal degradation, therefore limiting or minimizing the negative influence and pressure exerted by their environment. One such action is the physical activity of a disabled person, which may support considerable transformations in their lives, starting with an improvement in their general health and physical condition, through the development of their interests and the establishment of new interpersonal relations,

and ending with mental empowerment. However, the fact that seems crucial from the perspective of notions considered in this paper is that sport, and everything that it entails, may support significant changes in the manner in which the disabled see themselves and their life situations. I will make an attempt to take a closer look at his notion in subsequent points of this article.

### The Process of Transformations at the Level of Self-Identification of an Individual as a Result of Engagement in Sport

Stigmatization does not necessarily need to result in the development and maintenance of a stigmatized identity. If emotions connected with such a set of self-definitions pose a source of strong discomfort or suffering for an individual, they may start searching for new manners to characterize themselves (Melchior 1990:181; Golczyńska-Grondas 2014:152).

Hence, a social actor whose attitude is active when compared to the stereotype, may transform this negative image of themselves, and object to the harmful stigmatization, obtaining the definition of a person who is an exception to the rule. They may also redefine the concept of themselves and negative attributes related to the stigma, so they become a source of positive self-evaluation (Goffman cites statements of disabled people, adopted thanks to their dysfunctions, regarding their special sensitivity in perceiving themselves and the world Goffman 2005:42-43).

The people who experience *eradication from the previous biography*, may become aware of their identity by referring to what they were deprived of (Melchi-

or 1990:27). However, to make it possible, certain transformations need to take place connected with working out the matter of disability by the disabled individual and others. This refers to the process of continuous confirmation of identity of an individual. Refusal to validate a single element of an identity means that the individuals need to reinterpret their actions and reconstruct themselves. Discrepancies in the determination of identity means the necessity to assume a certain attitude towards those definitions through making a choice: adoption of an imposed image, refusal of that image, or an attempt to achieve a compromise (Golczyńska-Grondas 2014:140).

On the basis of the performed research, it was found out that “freeing” oneself from the stigmatization feeling and biographic “breakup”, and moving towards a new plan of action and a redefinition of self and one’s own role, takes place within a three-dimensional process:

- first of all, it focuses on oneself, which means the **introspection of “I”** and concentration on **interactions with one’s body**.
- secondly, it changes the object of comparison, that is, seeking a new **reference group** and **significant others**.
- thirdly, it is a revision of social identity, meaning the development of a strategy of coping with **public proclamation** of disability and the **presentation** of oneself.

These are not separate phases as they overlap one another to varying degrees and in different scopes.

In other words, regarding particular people, their biography will present overlapping phases, mentioned above, which means that the course does not follow step-by-step, but it is synchronous.

### Bodily Transformations and the Process of Reconstruction of Self by a Disabled Person Who Practices Sport

The researched people, in the period before the sport activity, felt clear discomfort, both physical and psycho-social, connected with their not being fully capable. According to those I spoke to, body dysfunctions hindered, and in some cases even rendered it impossible to function independently and “normally”. What is more, a dysfunctional body was perceived by those studied as a source of suffering, caused by its limitations. According to the researched individuals, their bodies took control over themselves, and forms of this power were determined by resistance, experienced in various situations of every day life. Here, it is worth recalling Thomas Osborne’s (1997) words, who claimed that the matter, which did not allow a person to forget about their body was stigma. Stigma, as a bodily *memento*, hinders the process of freeing oneself from the body, which becomes the main problem of those with disabilities (Osborne 1997).

I was unable to do a lot of things. Actually, I was able to do nothing on my own. Someone needed to help me clean myself, get up, get dressed (...); I was even unable to get to the toilet on my own. It was torture, I thought I’d be nothing anymore, but it wasn’t the worst, because it was like my problem, until I started going out, being among other people. Then, I simply

felt bad, I felt that something was wrong, I felt it all the time. [interview No. 11]

A body stigmatized with disability was a source of stigma for the researched individuals, first of all in those social relationships where it became a reason for discrimination. The respondents stated that they did not like their bodies, they were ashamed, because it differed from the generally accepted norms. The shame related to a dysfunctional body meant that these people tried to hide their handicap and mask their deficiencies. Only practicing sport and its accompanying experiences caused a gradual transformation in the manner of perceiving their disability. As emphasized by those I spoke to, it was connected with becoming familiar with their bodies and their possibilities “again”. These individuals very often found out that actions and activities which seemed hard or even impossible to them became achievable thanks to sport practicing. What is more, the disabled individuals who practice sport talked about exploring “unknown” possibilities of their bodies, and the “unidentified potential of their bodies”. Hence, the boundaries of not only their bodies but also of their belief in their strengths moved. The vision of the individual changes, from a feckless and dependent person, towards an individual capable of acting in a manner and in a scope that they had been unfamiliar with.

You know, a man doesn’t know himself until he faces a particular situation, until he tries to do something, especially if it seems impossible. And it was the case with me, I also didn’t believe that I could do something with myself, that I could be so capable (...) this is what sport gave me. [interview No. 5]

For the researched individuals, sport became a route which could be followed to support the process of accepting themselves and their disability effectively. A person with disability who took up a sports activity began to perceive their disability differently. At the beginning the changes took place slowly, over the course of time they were bigger and clearer, connected with “training” the body’s fitness.

Thus, a disabled person sees positive effects of their engagement in practicing sport, pertaining not only to transformations in the body’s fitness, but first of all in terms of acquiring greater control over the body, and improving self-confidence, the feeling of self-reliance and independence from others. This, in turn, constitutes an inclination to take up further challenges, which maintain and enhance the influence of sport on their bodies, psyche and interpersonal relations with those around them. This was accompanied by intensive work over the body. It usually consists in compliance with particular regimes, related among others to intensification of certain actions and a higher level of self-control. My interlocutors were usually aware of the fact that by neglecting their physical activity, they would achieve not only the functional regress of their bodies but they would also lose their “external image” – a definition attached to the disabled people’s individual identity by Katarzyna Kowal (2012:190):

I get involved because I can see the effects, not because it’s important to me, and I can’t imagine anymore that it could be different, like it was some time ago. It costs me a lot as I train 12 times per week, add trips, training camps and competitions of course. But it’s my life now, and I need to give in to this sit-

uation if I want to make something out of it. [interview No. 12]

Sport in the lives of the researched individuals became a factor responsible for the process of regaining faith in themselves, their possibilities, and it posed a source of belief in their own value and in the fact that despite a physical dysfunction, they remain fully-valuable and entitled members of society. Disabled people talked to themselves on the one hand about the manner in which they see themselves, and on the other, about the manner in which they are seen by others. Such a dialog, in both cases, was determined by certain stimuli coming from their environment. The more positive the stimulus, the higher the degree to which the disabled person was able to develop a more beneficial image of themselves, and the quicker they were able to “get over” the traumatic experiences connected with the situation that led to their disability.

A handicapped body with dysfunctions was not perceived by the disabled as something to be ashamed of, to be hidden from the world. While observing the changes of their body caused by sport practicing, such a person became satisfied and self-fulfilled. Therefore, a disabled body, which quite often was the reason for stigma, negative emotions, or even humiliation, was not associated with such experiences anymore. Hence, the body, as an outline of the actions and practices of an individual, became a significant element of constructing the feeling of their identity, through engagement in sport activity, and the control held provided a basic resource of maintaining this biographic continuity (Jakubowska 2009:170).

### The Role of Significant Others in the Process of Reconstructing the Identity of Physically Disabled People Practicing Sport

In terms of the conditions of biographic and identity process, special significance is given to contacts, interactions and bonds with others, encountered at various levels of social life. A central place in confirming (and shaping) identity is occupied by significant others, that is, by people who the individual is connected with and who have intense and emotional relationships with (Berger and Luckmann 1983:231). Ansel Strauss (1959:132) drew considerable attention to the relationship between the ego and significant others, claiming that maintenance of a coherent definition of self by an individual depends on positive validation of each new element of their identity. Refusal of such validation equals a necessity to reinterpret the individual’s actions, which means reinterpretations of the concept of oneself. What is more, Strauss notices that a significant role in the perception of self by an individual is played by whether they feel an integral part of the group they belong to. As he writes, “the path of the group becomes the path of the individual, and the mistakes of the group become his mistakes” (Strauss 1959:41).

The above statement also bears a significant meaning from the perspective of my research, as practicing sport means that an individual is met with a more significant number of people. It often happens that contact narrowed down to family and close relatives is, thanks to practicing sport, expanded by people who train and exercise together, or who simply attend social meetings. Hence, the circle

of people who the individual directly interacts with becomes larger:

I was withdrawn for a certain time, I was an introvert closed to others. I didn’t want to show myself, talk to anyone, because I was totally devastated. Nothing was important for me at that time. People weren’t important at all. And it would probably have stayed like this, but when I was brought here (to the training sessions - note by JN), I started to meet people. And I still do, because the group is constantly expanding (laughter - note by JN). [interview No. 10]

The creation of a group takes place here on the basis of the *commonness of a life situation* connected with the dysfunctions and resulting needs of the individuals (cf. Sajkowska 1999:11; Niedźwiedzki 2010:85; Golczyńska-Grondas 2014:146). The researched individuals had the possibility to become members of groups which included other disabled people. In such a situation, an individual perceived themselves as an integral part of the group, identifying with its goals (Strauss 1959:41). Participation in such a community was connected with the socialization processes, which consist not only in shaping a collective identity, but also in the potential (re)construction of the whole self-definition of the social actor (Golczyńska-Grondas 2014:139). Through observing and identifying other people, a disabled individual internalizes new roles, accompanying identities, motivational and interpretational schemes, as well as various entitlements, regarding their social value (cf. Berger and Luckman 1983:214-218; Golczyńska-Grondas 2014:105).

In this context, the notion of a *reference group* may also be applied as a comparative scheme in relation

to which people form basic judgments and evaluations, regarding their social position. Therefore, it becomes a basic element in shaping the self-evaluation of an individual (Kuhn 1972:175; Ziółkowski 1981:77). This happens because they compare their social position with that of others. An effect of such a process is identification with groups of people with similar relative privileges or impairments. As a result, the individuals adopt the attitudes and patterns of behavior of members who belong to those groups (Merton 1982). Within those groups, the individual agrees on plans of actions, and permanently reinterprets the reality in interaction with its members, leading to a discussion with himself. Thanks to those interactions and specific auto-narrations, they obtain a key to interpret their place in the world (Mead 1934).

After the accident I was down in the dumps. My world actually collapsed. I thought it would have been better if I had died and not become disabled. It was a hard time, so when Maria (name changed – JN) came, and said that I could do this or that, and that people such as myself can even play, I thought she was nuts. Despite all of this, I wanted to go out as I could not sit in this cage anymore. I listened to reason. (...) Now I know that it was the best thing I could do in that situation. It allowed me to look at my life differently, set myself free from the dark thoughts and think that I can still live, work and function among other people relatively normally. [interview No. 14]

A sports activity allows a person to build the feelings of self-esteem and trust towards himself and also his environment (Wilski et al. 2012:86). This is down to the gradual transformation in the scope

of perception of the individual's surrounding environment. Such positive strengthening, created thanks to building group bonds, as well as possibilities to show the environment that one is a functional unit, is on the one hand an important source for the realization of one's life plans, and on the other, it supports *self-acceptance*. From this perspective, individuals become subjects of consideration for themselves. This process is additionally enhanced by people who became especially important for the individual in a group (they obtain the status of *significant others*), as they play the role of specific guides, teachers and mentors. Such people may also become guardians of the individual's biography, exerting a strong influence on their identity and faith. The description of relationships between a disabled person practicing sport and the one that makes a certain 'road sign', pointing towards a desired action, may be applied to the notion of coaching, introduced by Anselm Strauss (1996:94). Such a relationship is most often established between people who are characterized with certain features, significant in terms of a given situation. In the case of disabled sportsmen, the function of the coach may be adopted by another player or an institutional trainer. The latter had such a possibility because of the formal status, while another team (group) member may be considered this way when they have several significant attributes at the same time. First of all, it needs to be an experienced person with considerable seniority who knows the institutional rules, but also the informal organizational principles perfectly; secondly, this person needs to be older; and thirdly, they should have certain trophies and titles. The main qualities of the coaching relationship are rooted in

the fact that a pupil, while going through subsequent stages, needs a guide. This is not only about the conventional sense of teaching skills but also about the fact that while the "coached" is moving within the social space, there are highly important processes taking place, requiring an explanation, and so here a crucial role is played by the "coach". These notions are also raised by Bourdieu and Wacquant (2001:220), emphasizing that "learning the professions, craft, vocation, (...) requires pedagogy that is slightly different from the one applied in knowledge acquisition (...). There are numerous manners of thinking and acting, which can often be quite lively, transferred in a practical form thanks to practices based on direct contact between the one teaching and the one being taught." While the mentioned authors highlight characteristics of the "teaching" process, Strauss refers in this context to identity transformations, which became a part of the "student" himself.

Alex was a couch of ours here, as far as I remember. I think it had always been like this, that's what I heard. And when I came here, he took care of me, showed me around, explained the principles and everything, he simply took care of me. I felt more confident when he was here, telling me what to do. Others also listened to him, because he knows a lot, and he played professionally in the past. [interview No. 10]

A highly significant element of "coaching" is the time schedule. A *guide-coach* needs to balance things when completing subsequent stages, so they can apply certain strategies. A frequently encountered strategy is the so called prescription, regarding how to act, i.e. to realize oneself in sport and to achieve

successes. Therefore, the coach's role is to point out what needs to be done, what you need to do to distinguish yourself, which qualities need to be developed and which need to be gotten rid of. In a word, it is a formula which may not guarantee success on its own, but the application of which may bring a given person closer to the goal. What is more, coaches apply schedules which determine subsequent steps that need to be followed by a disabled individual to achieve progress gradually. A coach takes care of the player's development, not only shaping their career, but also exerting a certain influence on their biography. Therefore, they perform continuous work over the individual's biography and identity. For a disabled individual, the completion of stages is not only the achievement of subsequent levels but of pushing their own, often symbolic, boundaries. Therefore, a coach may not only motivate a disabled person, but also trigger their positive emotions related to the achieved successes, which pertain to the completion of subsequent challenges.

### Public Presentation as a Manner of Manifesting One's Disability by People Practicing Sport

Anselm Strauss believed that each of us presents ourselves to others (and ourselves) while examining ourselves in the mirror of our own judgments (Strauss 1959:9). In such a context, some of the researched individuals held the belief that they would not be accepted or understood by those who are able-bodied. This meant that they were unable to reveal their disability in front of others while at the same time being afraid of exposure. Here, it is worth citing Erving Goffman (2005 [1963]), who believed that people with a stigmatizing feature are afraid of

a lack of acceptance from their environment. This in turn pushes them toward self-exclusion and social insulation. On the other hand, as suggested by Strauss (1959), an individual may oppose the imposed definitions, adopting a clearer identity project (cf. Golczyńska-Grondas 2014:139). Therefore, the moment of *public performance* is seen as important by a person with a disability. Then, the person may reveal himself in an open space, through for example, participation in a sports competition. These circumstances include the elements of “facing a challenge”, but it is also connected with *public proclamation*. According to Strauss (1959), it is an individual’s statement about their certain views or attributes. It is a certain passage in the process of the exposure of a disabled individual, which means revealing himself to a larger group of people, including also those who are able-bodied. What is more, it suggests that a disabled individual encounters another turning point in their biography, making a decision to expose their dysfunction in a wider social framework.

For me, the first performance in front of an audience was unique. When you see all those people, who observe you, look at you, and you don’t know what they’re thinking, it’s really paralyzing. You have a thought then, wouldn’t it be better to run away, to pull the plug on it. But it would mean that you give up halfway, you’ll be defeated by your own fears. [interview No. 17]

In such conditions, a disabled individual needs to make a qualitative jump in their biography, consisting in showing off hidden qualities of their bodies. Such a circumstance may be compared with the *open context of awareness* described by Anselm

Strauss and Barney Glaser (1965), where parties of the interaction do not hide the existence of a certain situation – disability in this case. The audience knows who they are dealing with, and presents no comments or takes no depreciating actions, and the social actor tries not to hide the attributes which are an indispensable part of them (which, according to them, are depreciating), and this is reflected to some extent in how they perceive themselves:

For me, it was almost like, I don’t know how to put it, simply like something unreal, (...) that I took the plunge and took off the prosthesis with everyone around, simple as that. But it was easier than I’d thought, because I wasn’t thinking that I was removing the prosthesis, in my mind I was in a different place. I thought more about the competition, about the game, the result, that I’d need to sweat, to do my best. And this was what counted, nothing more. And when I understood that it can be done, that there’s nothing more to it, I stopped being afraid of showing myself without the prosthesis, that others can see me, what I really am like. And say to myself that, when you don’t think about it so much, you can do a lot more when you aren’t afraid and blocked anymore. [interview No. 19]

Hence, sport supports positive thinking about oneself and one’s own possibilities, which leads to the fact that the disabled ascribe a higher value to their “life vitality” than to the remaining life spheres. Sport may pose a certain bridge between physical activity and other types of actions of a disabled person. It means that for an individual, sport may pose a source of inspiration, but also of creation of an internal power, which stimulates activity within oth-

er fields of life. From this perspective, an especially significant aspect – as suggested by the disabled – is to regain the belief in one’s own possibilities, leading to the reconstruction of life goals and priorities. It very often means greater openness of such a person, which in turn supports life progress, both in the private and public spheres. Within the first aspect, it is mainly about courage in establishing relationships with other people, and the potential establishment of closer contacts (sometimes leading to marriages). On the other hand, the courage and self-esteem derived from a sports activity means that an individual starts to present a more assertive attitude in regular relationships of everyday life.

It is worth emphasizing that practicing sport, especially when combined with participation in sport events, may become a manner of creating a positive image of the disabled among healthy people, even prestige. Therefore, it is an opportunity to prove to able-bodied individuals that the disabled are sufficiently strong, motivated and resourceful to be active, brave and passionate. Then, sport seems to be a perfect tool for changes in perception of the disabled. Through sports events, the disabled show their “world”, often demystifying it for completely non-oriented and unaware able-bodied members of society (cf. Wilski et al. 2012:86). Therefore, this is also an attempt to reach society, a form of presenting another image of disability and of people with disabilities, as people who are self-reliant, but also able to achieve life successes and undertake various tasks, and seek challenges and rivalry.

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. [interview No. 17]

In this context, sport plays an important role, as it is one way than serves not only to incorporate disabled people into society, but it also allows them to present themselves from a more advantageous perspective, as self-reliant, valuable, but also brave and passionate people.

## Conclusions

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 improvement in their physical condition and obtains an opportunity to take part in actions with individuals with similar life problems. The individual begins to change the manner in which they perceive themselves and the surrounding world. This process is usually 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. It is a kind of passage from the feeling of hopelessness and lost opportunities to a new life path. Therefore, the individual adapts to life in transformed conditions in relation to the period before the incident, not completely giving up a certain lifestyle. This is a process consisting in the development of a new manner of functioning, which will provide the individual with the minimization of potential losses or the necessity to remodel previous plans. It is reflected well in the words of the people I spoke to:



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 others pulling me out of my shell and showing me that something can be done with me despite the disability, made me believe in myself. It happened that here [in the club - note by JN] I found myself, and it helped me to pull myself together. [interview No. 18]

The performed research proves that practicing sport may influence the manner of perceiving oneself and one's life situation, leading to a gradual recovery of self-esteem and to restore the faith in one's own strength. A sports activity can be the basis for social and mental transformations of a disabled person. Through sport, an individual gains support but also

the awareness that there are people that share their cognitive perspective. Therefore, as highlighted by George Mead (1934:243), the ego of the individual emerges, resulting from the attitudes of others (subjective ego), but also it is an organized collection of attitudes of other people which are adopted by this individual (objective ego). Ego emerges on the basis of knowledge connected with an image of ourselves in the eyes of others, and the expectations towards us, which is mentioned by Krzysztof Konecki (2005:43). A view from the angle of interactionist sociology allows us to determine the significance of sport practiced by the disabled, which acquires special significance in the individual's life, becoming a source of attitudes, behaviors and actions in various, also non-sport, contexts of their every day existence.

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## Rola sportu w procesie rekonstrukcji tożsamości osoby z nabytą dysfunkcją organizmu

**Abstrakt:** Artykuł porusza kwestie przemian dokonujących się w życiu osób niepełnosprawnych fizycznie, które związane są z ich zaangażowaniem w aktywność sportową. W artykule staram się wykazać, że uprawianie sportu może stworzyć sprzyjające warunki do samopoznania i samoakceptacji osoby z nabytą dysfunkcją ciała.

Celem przeprowadzonych badań jest analiza procesualnego wymiaru przemian w życiu osoby niepełnosprawnej dokonujących się pod wpływem doświadczeń związanych z uprawianiem sportu.

W badaniach wykorzystane zostały dane jakościowe uzyskane za pomocą pogłębionych wywiadów swobodnych przeprowadzonych wśród osób niepełnosprawnych uprawiających sport. Analiza i interpretacja materiału badawczego prowadzona była zgodnie z procedurami metodologii teorii ugruntowanej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** niepełnosprawność, ciało, sport, zmiana, tożsamość