



The Educational Role of Sport Practiced by People with Disabilities

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Abstract

The purpose of the conducted research was to analyze the processual dimension of transformations of a disabled person's life which take place under the influence of experiences related to practicing sport. In the article I try to prove the similarity of the sport structure with the educational system structure, where apart from strictly educational functions, there are also socialization processes taking place, diverse in terms of measures and results. The basis for the realization of the purpose mentioned above was the personal experiences of the researched individuals. Hence, the research exploits qualitative data, collected during participant observations and in-depth free interviews conducted among the disabled practicing sports. Analysis and interpretation of the research material was performed in accordance with grounded theory methodology. The article has been prepared as a consequence of research carried out between 2013 and 2016 among the society of the disabled who practice professional sports. The studies refer to the characteristics of the sports career path of people with disabilities which, regarding its specificity, has strong roots in institutionalized practices related to inclusion, continuation and maintaining the main action, i.e. practicing sport.

Keywords: Sport, disability, socialization, education.

Introduction

The subject of this work¹ is the matter of the special educational experience of the disabled who practice sport on a professional level. I present this notion by referring to the concept of symbolic interactionism theory, in the approach of the Chicago school (Glaser & Strauss 1965; Mead 1956; Strauss, 1959; Strauss et al., 1985). These are the grounds on which I prove that the conversion which is designed and required by a given institution, corresponds to various experiences at subsequent stages of the training, leading to the general transformation of the perception of the reality by an individual. I do not try to deliberate or reconstruct the personality of disabled people engaged in professional sport in my analyses. I am more interested in the social processes of activation and maintaining a basic action, i.e. practicing sport, and the accompanying procedures that are carried out by institutions responsible for organizing that action rather than in the underlying personality features, which are not a subject of analysis in this article.

I assume in the presented article that the main aspect of what is transmitted “cannot be found in non-confidential contents, but rather in the organization of the training actions themselves” (Bourdieu 1996, p. 84). In the article I will be focusing on the analysis of pedagogic practices assignable to the training system, which is connected to the so-called integration code, termed by Bernstein (1999) as invisible pedagogy. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) call it a camouflaged pedagogy, requiring a student, who in this case is a future trainee of extreme sports of the disabled, to identify with the master or a more experienced friend, at the expense of authentic subordination.

The article has been prepared as a consequence of research carried out between 2013 and 2016 among the society of disabled people practicing extreme sports. This research makes an attempt to develop a general characteristic related to both a sports career path, which regarding its character is strongly rooted in institutionalized inclusion practices, as well as continuing and maintaining this way of life, i.e. practicing sport by the disabled

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individuals. The article covers an analysis of one of the threads outlined, in such a way that it is related to providing an answer to the following question: In what way does the process of sport education of the disabled take place, and what role is played by interpersonal relationships between the coach and the mentee, as well as between the group and its member?

Method

Data Collection

The research material applied in this study encompasses the personal experiences of disabled people realizing their physical activity through participating in various forms of sport. Semi-structured free 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 included some records from participant observations made during meetings and sporting events, training sessions and consultations (Adler & Adler 1994). The research was performed between 2013 and 2016 across Poland, in training centers devoted to and adapted to the needs of the disabled. While starting to develop this text, the empirical material comprised 97 interviews and 35 records from observations (as of 1 July 2016). The interviews were performed with 47 women and 50 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 premises that supported the selection of the above mentioned techniques arise first of all from accepted ontological (human experiences, interpretations, knowledge, evaluations and 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 is comprised of interaction, conversations with people, listening to stories and gaining access to knowledge, evaluations, impressions of individuals). Secondly, the acquired data are of a whole and in-depth character, which is compliant with the notions put forward by Rubin and Rubin (2012), according to which the qualitative research is applied in relation to those notions which require a deeper understanding, served best by detailed examples and elaborated narration.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was an iterative constant comparative process involving descriptive and interpretive analyses (Patton, 2001; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Analysis of the research material was performed in accordance with grounded theory methodology. 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 relationships between them. As a result, ten key themes were distinguished, which reflected the main contexts of the physical activity of the disabled in the scope of their psychosocial rehabilitation and improvement of quality of life. Later, the article describes three levels of the 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 for selection was acquiring the 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 & 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 & Strauss 1967). Such a manner of performance resulted in people representing 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. Although saturation as a concept has been interpreted in different ways, Strauss and Corbin (1990) have suggested that it is a “matter of degree”. They argued that saturation should be concerned more with reaching the point where it becomes “counter-productive” and that “the new” that is discovered does not necessarily add anything to the overall story, model, theory or framework. In the current study, the above recommendation was followed in relation to reaching the saturation of themes.

Data analysis was supported by CAQDAS – *Computer Assisted/Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software*. Work on the analytical-conceptual level was carried out with the NVivo 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).

Results

Within the educational process, so-called *orienting significant others* (Kuhn, 1964, p. 18) bear a special significance for an individual, often becoming *biographic guardians*, i.e. people who exert an active influence on the fate of an individual.

In the case of disabled sportsmen, they may be both other competitors or a coach. While the coach practically always occupies the role of *formal-institutional* significant other, in numerous cases he is also a *formal-spontaneous* significant other. These roles can be divided between the coach and another sportsman, but someone who always needs to meet certain criteria. First of all, it should be a more experienced person who is perfectly aware of institutional principles, but also of informal organizational rules. Secondly, this person is older. Thirdly, with certain trophies, they are a titled individual. The significant other could be a competitor who introduced the disabled person into the world of sport, which is equally important but not necessary. From the perspective of the educational process of a disabled individual, it is also significant, so it should be a person with a certain past, and someone who is an example of the transformations of a disabled individual who undertakes or continues their sporting careers.

The Role of a Coach as a Significant Other

The attitude of continuous verification of one’s qualifications, or as it was put by my interviewees, striving for “perfection”, is a result of pedagogical practices referring to the training relationship, which hides motives for developing specific ethics of practicing sport in the disabled. The sports training is intended to increase the level of bodily fitness, as well as

improve mental attitude, necessary during competition. The result should produce a human being, not only a trained sportsman. The leading role is adopted by coaches and instructors, proven by the fragment of a statement, included below:

And now I'm laughing a little, but I didn't feel like laughing earlier, actually I hated school, and when I started to practice sport properly I actually was out of the frying-pan into the fire again, because I had the same teacher as before, this time as a coach, but I needed to toe the line, to obey his instructions, and generally be so nice and compliant, but I had always been some kind of little devil [w19.15]²

Hence, the description of relationships between a disabled person practicing sport and one that makes a certain “road sign”, pointing out the desired action, may be applicable to the notion of coaching, introduced by Strauss. According to Strauss, “A coaching relationship exists if someone seeks to move someone else along a series of steps” within the social space (Strauss, 1959, p. 112). The main qualities of the coaching relationship are rooted in the fact that a pupil, while going through subsequent stages, needs a guide (Niedbalski 2016). 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 inside them requiring an explanation of the particular actions’ sense, and the whole activity as such. In order to explain this, it is best to refer to Bourdieu and Wacquant, according to whom “the teaching of a *métier*, a craft, a trade, (...) requires a pedagogy which is completely different from that suited to the teaching of knowledge (...) There are numerous modes of thinking and action, and oftentimes the most vital ones are transmitted from practice to practice, through total and practical modes of transmission founded upon direct and lasting contact between the one who teaches and the one who learns” (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p. 222). It is also confirmed by the experiences of my interviewees. The following fragment of an interview may serve as an example here:

My teacher, or I'd say even more, my guide and the man who shaped me, was my first coach, Mr. Kowalski [the last name changed by the researcher - note by JN]. He showed me not only how to train, how to perform the exercises properly, but first of all he created this positive aura around him, he was like my second father, who listens and advises, but also gives a good belting when needed.” [w. 13.7.]

The “coach-guide” can employ various tactics while adopting the role of an educator, one of which is *prescription*, i.e. the manner in which you can fulfill yourself in sport and become successful. Therefore, the coach’s role is to point out what needs to be done, what you need to distinguish yourself with, which qualities need to be developed and which should be gotten rid of. In one word, it is a formula which may not necessarily guarantee success on its own, but the application of which may bring a given person closer to their goal (Niedbalski, 2016).

A coach is inevitable, because he is not only the person who shows you what to do at a given moment, but he just has the knowledge, he knows what should be done to achieve success. You need to rely on him and trust him, as such a relationship is necessary

² Within the whole article, next to the fragments of my interviewees' speeches, I provide information on the year in which a given interview was conducted (the first number) and its order number, specifying its place in the sequence of interviews (the second figure).

because it helps a lot. I can see that my younger friends see a second father in the coach, someone very close, who they are not afraid to talk to about different stuff with. But our coach is also a person who knows how to approach everyone, how to talk to them, how they feel and how to motivate them. And he really tries to help, not only in sport, but in general, in totally mundane issues [w.13.13].

What is more, coaches apply schedules which determine the subsequent steps that need to be followed by a disabled individual to achieve progress gradually. A coach introduces the participant to subsequent stages of their development, not only shaping their career, but also exerting a certain influence on their biography. Therefore, they perform continuous work on the participant's biography and identity (Niedbalski, 2016). Other stages, and their completion, are not only the achievement of the next career levels for the disabled, but it means they also go beyond their own - often symbolic - boundaries, related to the acceptance of self and their disability.

For me personally, the things I do here have a double value. Firstly, I have a chance to step out and stop being a poor disabled person who always needs someone to wipe their ass. But secondly, it is a personal thing for me, because it gives me a possibility to defeat my worries and anxieties, which are often hardest to face [w.15.12]

Another tactic, which is of an educational dimension, is "to challenge". It is significant here for these challenges to be "dosed", with the proper frequency tailored to the given person, and possible to be achieved with a certain level of involvement and effort. Therefore, a coach may not only motivate the participant, but also trigger their positive emotions related to the achieved successes.

The coach's task is to keep the sportsman believing that he can be better and can constantly improve. A coach must not only train, but also stimulate the sportsman, to strengthen his belief in his own power. This is a never-ending motivation, such... hm..., such continuous work on the sportsman, so he does not doubt himself for even a moment, especially when his performances are bad, when it's hard for him, but also so he doesn't slip into the delusion of his grandeur, when he is successful and on top [w15.5].

Hence, the coaching process of a disabled person should lead to their constant improvement, including both the physical abilities of their bodies, and the development of cognitive skills related to the proper manner of reading and interpreting the transformation taking place in their lives. In the personal dimensions, on the one hand it means reconstructing the image of self, consisting in the conversion of "I" from the disabled person. This is often based on a stereotype cognitive schema, which is actually a product of the internalization of social patterns related to the perception of incomplete capability of an individual, and on the other proper self-perception as a fully-fledged sportsman.

An Educative Role of a Reference Group

Entrance into the world of sport comes not only from face-to-face contact with a coach, but also from meeting others, i.e. the direct entrance into the group and co-creation of customs, standards and objectives within its intentional community. Sport is a form of activity of the disabled which forms a space for certain interactions between its participants, and which includes numerous social actors. It is broadly related to the fact that participation in various forms of physical activity, including sports, is of a group character, and it frequently adopts the form of organized actions. The formation of a group, apart from the obvious consolidation of its members around issues of the sport, also takes place on the basis of commonness of a life situation, related to held dysfunctions and the resulting needs (Sajkowska 1999, p. 11; Niedźwiedzki 2010, p. 85). Therefore, sport can play a role that is especially significant in the educational process of an individual, becoming an anchor for

developing faith in their own power and possibilities. Additionally, contact with people with similar dysfunctions, practicing a given discipline, can reinforce the belief about their hidden potential.

When you start playing sport, especially at the professional level, it's not like you do whatever you like. On the contrary, you need to subordinate yourself to the coach, the applicable principles, or the rigor of life, but also to the people who you either play with in a team or train with. Because usually a coach takes care of several people at the same time, and he needs to devote a certain amount of time to each one of them, and at the same time foster the right atmosphere. But it's also true that the sportsman must integrate with the remaining people, to become close to them, to be able to cooperate, because otherwise it's simply impossible to practice or work [w.13.13].

Among the crucial indicators of socialization to get familiar with are the various secrets of the game, including the ones which are shared between members of the group as “expert knowledge”. The experienced players often constitute a resource of knowledge to those who have just started their adventure with sport. Hence, transmission of knowledge among the group members takes place, which additionally strengthens its internal unity, ensuring the continuity of functioning. At the same time, this is the principle that governs the reconstruction of separate people's statuses, as on the one hand we deal with people that have the “authority” label attached, and on the other hand there are “pupils”. Hence, so called role controllers may appear, i.e. people whose task it is to help a new group member become familiar with, understand and realize a new role. The unique balance inside the group can be maintained in this manner, but this is also a significant process in terms of existing group members legitimizing new people.

I felt at home among my present friends from the group. But it was not like this at the beginning. That must have lasted a while. You know, it's like I needed to get used to them, and they needed to get used to me. It must have taken a while, but we got to know each other gradually [w.14.3]

However, first of all, in the perspective of the presented notion, it is crucial to acquire the manner of perceiving the surrounding reality and the interconnected response to the individual's environment (Niedbalski, 2015). A group provides each member with certain resources, on the one hand with a certain matrix through which they interpret their own and others' behaviors, and on the other with the stimulation to act, consolidating a belief that these actions are right. Therefore, when a given individual becomes a member of the group, they start to gradually change not only their thinking, but also how they function and react to other people. Therefore, we encounter a situation in which a disabled person acquires a feeling that their involvement in a sporting activity is right, bringing not only physical but also mental and social benefits.

Becoming a member depends on the degree to which specific requirements are met and its principles are adopted, as well as on the individual identifying with it. This in turn becomes possible when the cognitive perspective represented by team members is recognized, understood and then accepted and internalized. A group of active people practicing sport becomes a reference group. Thus, we reach a situation where a disabled person undergoes a gradual metamorphosis related to the acquisition and translatability of the cognitive perspective, thanks to being a member of a group of disabled people who are physically active, within which their role of a sportsman is shaped.

Since I started moving, coming here and meeting people, I started looking at myself, and generally at people, in a completely different way. Before, I had the impression that nothing was awaiting me, that I was doomed to live in my house, maybe in front of the computer, but not with people, but virtually. It's different here, I feel that I can do more,

but I'm also required to do more. And I think it's so normal, not sitting on your ass and wanting others to do everything for you [w.15.5]

Participation in a group influences not only the shape of a collective identity, but also potentially the (re)construction of the whole system of self-definition of a social actor (Golczyńska-Grondas 2014, p. 139). Through observation and identification with others, the individual internalizes new roles and the interconnected identities, motivational and interpretation schemas, as well as the accompanying validations related to e.g. conditionings of the social value of an individual (Berger & Luckman 1983, pp. 214-218).

Discussion and Conclusion

The presented article raises the notions of changes that take place in the life of a physically disabled person which are caused by his engagement in a sporting activity. The conclusions drawn from the research prove that practicing sport is a process of transformations taking place at the body level as well as the perceptions of disabled people, both of which are related to the influence exerted by particular individuals and whole groups that the individual becomes a member of. A key place in the process is taken by people with the label of significant other, usually drawn from the sporting environment. They are older and more experienced colleagues of the young student, or people responsible for training and helping the individual adjust to adopting the role of sportsman. In the latter case, it is instructors and coaches who play the function of both teacher and educator. Practicing sport is also related to an individual entering a new environment, which in turn means the necessity to become familiar with the governing rules and principles. The most significant element is the gradual attainment of a certain scope and kind of knowledge, and the acquisition of a specific cognitive perspective. Thus, a *reference group* is established, which not only influences the perception of the surrounding social reality, but it also often becomes a counterpoint for previous experiences of the disabled person.

The research carried out proved that the mechanism of sport's impact on a disabled person is based on an educational process, where a significant role is played both by significant individuals and whole communities. It happens because people usually realize themselves in a group of people who share a common background. At the same time, for an action to be completed successfully, the sportsman needs to adopt certain common principles helping them understand the situation. As suggested by Lipiec (1987, pp. 19-20), the foundation of those basic principles, supports "the creation of a complicated structure of connections and relationships, both basic, first of all based on direct interpersonal relations, and complementary, usually reaching for regulatory frameworks and customary imponderabilia." The element that connects all members of a given group is the acceptance of the assets of the sport, which enables the common realization of a specific value. Therefore, sport education must be understood as a process where, first of all, the successive construction of bonds in the direct environment takes place. Secondly, it includes integration of the group, which must be related to the approval of others and the creation of relationships with groups of a similar character. Thirdly, socialization is the process of following co-created social subjects. Finally, the socialization process, in order to bring about the desired results, should be of an axiologically positive character. In such a situation, sport is not just a purpose, or an ordinary measure to achieve the objective, but it is a value for a person and culture, a place of humanism and civilization. Therefore, it can be stated after Dziubiński (2012, pp. 60-63) that, regarding its role and significance, sport must be understood within an educational framework, and its power must be utilized for the harmonious development of its participants.

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