

RESEARCH

Rehab/ituation from a Phenomenological Perspective: The Case of Fencing for the Blind and Visually Impaired

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The emerging discipline of fencing for the blind and visually impaired is a distinct practice that calls for the unconventional employment of perceptual affordances and bodily doings. This paper explores the meaning of ability and agency in narratives of blind and visually impaired fencers' lived experiences. By focusing on narratives of risk taking, active handling, and creativity, we have identified three specific ways in which fencers experience their being-in-the-world. Our findings suggest that instead of rehabilitating to the norm, fencing contributes to *rehab/ituation*: conceptualising the rearrangement of one's body schema according to personal affordances. This concept, which is present in the notion of rehab/ituation as opposed to rehabilitation, makes possible a more creative and inclusive way of being in the world. Our respondents' stories of intelligence in the flesh, know-how and ability, are stories of fitting – whereas disorientations and disruptions represent a sort of misfitting between the body and an environment.

Keywords: fencing for blind and visually impaired; lived experience; dis/ability; agency; mis/fitting; rehab/ituation

1. Introduction

Once considered a survival skill, the practice of fencing carried with it the implicit requirement of sight in order for the fencer to make sense of the environment and fight opponents successfully. Today, the discipline has been reimagined as both art and sport. Modern fencers may bring to their encounters different skills, and make use of the different affordances that their environment offers; visual cues are not necessarily part of this. Blindness, however, is still a social marker that immediately influences one's encounters in and with the world. In our increasingly visual society, the inability to see is thought to deprive one of access to an enormous facet of the flickering world in which we live. As such, sight impairment is often considered a disability, irrespective of the phenomenological reality of the everyday lives of people who are blind and visually impaired. To understand how fencers who are blind and visually impaired make sense of both the world and their embodiment, this paper explores the meaning of ability and agency from a phenomenological perspective. As such, our study focuses on how fencers experience their world: how they 'are in the world'; how they act and 'orientate' (Ahmed 2006). In addition, we will argue that fencing may contribute to an existential reorientation in the world. To describe this phenomenon of reorientation or re-inhabiting we introduce the concept of rehab/ituation. Unlike 'rehabilitation', rehab/ituation allows for a more creative, inclusive and productive engagement with the world. For example, fencers who are blind or visually impaired may rehab/ituate their blindness and their embodiment through employment of senses that are spontaneous and comfortable to them, instead of those reserved to a sighted world.

1.1. Fencing for the blind and visually impaired

The emerging discipline of fencing for the blind and visually impaired is a distinct practice that calls for the unconventional employment of perceptual affordances and bodily doings. Unlike traditional (modern, able-bodied) fencing, which is very much rule bound and strictly categorised, fencing for the blind allows for fencers with a variety of embodied differences to engage in a duel and to fence by relying on a combination of sensory inputs of their choice, excluding sight.

For much of its history, fencing has been broken down into two categories based on bodily capabilities – able-bodied¹ and wheelchair fencing – three categories based on weapon (foil, sabre and épée),² two categories based on gender,

¹ Able-bodied fencing has a centuries long history, with duels dating back to the Renaissance and as a martial art or sport back to the 18th century.

² Each of the three weapons of modern fencing is subject to different rules. Foil is the lightest and the target area that counts for a point (for a touché) is mainly limited to the upper part of the body, excluding arms. Both for foil and épée, which is slightly heavier and has a target area that

and several based on age. Teams of fencers who are blind and visually impaired – which also warmly accept sighted members under the condition that they, too, wear a blindfold – only exist in a couple of countries, including the United States, Uruguay, Sweden, the United Kingdom, Portugal, France and Italy. This type of fencing, unlike its forerunner, does not categorise fencers by gender or age, and the only weapon currently in use is épée. Some of the rules are still subject to ongoing negotiations among international teams. However, others have been universally established, such as one concerning the delimitation of the fencing area and guiding threads (or lack thereof), which help fencers make sense of the surrounding space. Regardless of how much a fencer sees (or does not), everyone is obliged to wear a blindfold, in order to ensure that no one has an advantage in this sense. It is forbidden to use the more aggressive fencing techniques such as *flèche*, which is typically employed during the offence, because it could cause the fencer to accidentally hit a wall or another object.

2. Thinking/Doing Dis/ability

To contextualise our study within contemporary debates within disability studies, we start with a discussion of the concept of 'disability', and explain how we approach it in this study. Whereas the term 'impairment' refers to various conditions such as living with blindness or partial sightedness, having a mobility limitation or cognitive difference (Shakespeare 2018), 'disability' is used to emphasise the ways in which, for example, built environments, language and social norms are disabling for people who live with impairments. Often, impairments are problematically considered to be individual medical issues, and disabilities are seen as deficits of a sort. The deficit concept of disability derives from a range of sources including social Darwinism, liberal utilitarianism, medicalisation and eugenics (Barnes 2012: 13). Several decades of governmental policy revision, efforts to transform attitudes and spaces, as well as academic research (for example, Barnes 1992; Oliver 1981; and many others) have aimed to shift the focus from impairment itself as the cause of disability, to conceive of a *disabling society*. That is, to a social and physical environment that disables certain people (Oliver 1981). In this paper we expand the category of *differently able* to include more than just individuals with recognisable impairments. In fact, all bodies differ in their ability, and one and the same person may feel more or less capable of doing different things at different times, in different places, for many reasons. While constructions such as *differently able-bodied* take into account the possibility that a person is not *dis-abled*, the notion is still limited and does not accurately represent persons to whom it refers. As Garland-Thomson (2011) has explained, people create different fits and misfits with the world and they are capable or incapable of doing daily tasks, depending on the context they are immersed in or on specific situations. We use the term *dis/ability* written in this way to express a certain hesitation as to whether an impairment implies *disability* – or an individual issue – thus criticising the deficit model of disability. Similarly, the term *mis/fit*, written thus, presumes that people in different situations create different kinds of *fits* and *misfits* with their environment.

Dis/ability activism, represented by both national federations and institutes as well as non-government organisations, dates back to the 1960s. However, the efforts to highlight the issues of athletes who are blind and visually impaired only achieved broad awareness two decades later, in 1980s, with the establishment of the International Blind Sports Federation. Activism has long been accompanied by scholarly research into dis/ability, and the social model of disability (Barnes 1992; Cumberbatch & Negrine 1992; Hevey 1992) has played an important role in changing the focus on impairment from that of a personal deficit to a complex of problems resulting from disabling environments, barriers and cultures (Barnes 2012: 18). In addition, social constructivist views on bodies and dis/ability suggests that both are subjected to discursive and social forces, and authors in the field of dis/ability studies have written about the social nature of impairment (Abberley 1987; Shakespeare & Watson 1995). In this perspective, social signifiers are inscribed upon impaired bodies, which actually constructs them as dis/abled.

Over the last two decades, a solely social constructivist approach to disability has been criticised for neglecting the lived experience of persons who have impairments. Based upon the work of the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, contemporary researchers have explored the lived experiences of those experiencing sickness, disease and illness (Svenaeus 2009; Aho & Aho 2008), and disability (Paterson & Hughes 1999; Weiss 2015). A significantly smaller body of work (Hammer 2012; Tekcan et al. 2015) represents the phenomenological accounts of individuals who are blind. In addition, Berger (2009), Hardin and Hardin (2004), as well as Smith and Sparkes (2012), have called for a more nuanced study of competitive disability sports. Interest in the relevance of sports for disability is also increasing within the field of phenomenological explorations. Such explorations focus on autobiographical accounts of illness and sports (Stewart, Smith & Sparkes 2011), on narratives of injuries (Sparkes & Smith 2008), and on the relevance of sport for skilled coping (Hogeveen 2001; Martin 2011). Furthermore, interpretative phenomenological analysis has been applied as a productive method for analysing meaning of artificial limbs (Murray & Harrison 2004) and experiences of stroke survivors. Finally, in her study of tandem cycling, Hammer (2015) explores how people with different bodily, sensory and especially visual skills experience their bodily identities, interdependency, and social dynamics.

encompasses the entire body, only hits with the tip of the blade count as a point. Despite the fact that sabre is as light as foil, the usage of this weapon is more physically demanding – not only do hits with the tip of the blade count as a point, but hits with the entire blade count as well. The part of the weapon that guards the hand is slightly larger than in other weapons, for purposes of added protection. Several other rules differ in all three weapons. Fencing for the blind and visually impaired makes use only of the épée.

The present study aims to complement this field of enquiry by offering a phenomenological account of ability and agency in the lived experiences of fencers who are blind and visually impaired, as well as of the relevance of fencing for a plurality of usages of bodily affordances. This project thus aims to contribute to the body of work that challenges biomedical, cultural, mainstream phenomenological and other devaluations of supposedly anomalous bodies (Shildrick 2009: 28), and the prioritisation of a very limited and often unachievable combination of specific bodily competencies. It does so by offering insight into a variety of experiences, modalities of perception and relations that subjects may have in and with the world (Scully 2008: 94), as well as by offering alternative ways of understanding the embodied self. This study, based primarily on in-depth interviews of fencers who are blind and visually impaired, specifically considers whether and how fencers perceive the world they live in as inaccessible or disabling. Therefore, we explore how these fencers make sense of their embodied agency, using the phenomenological notion of 'I can (not)', which is to be understood as a negotiation between what one is and is not capable of doing. Here, we analyse fencers' lived experience of an embodied potential that differs from the majority, in order to understand how the phenomenal body is lived in its rich and varied experience. Exploring how respondents experience their allegedly materially unfit bodies, this phenomenological study investigates how people endow their bodily doings with meaning and how they make sense of their immersion in the world. To this end, we initially offer insight into the discipline of fencing for the blind and visually impaired. We further discuss phenomenological theories that are primarily concerned with embodied aspects of being, and present the methodology for the empirical study. Finally, we present and discuss the study's findings.

2.1. Dis/ability from a phenomenological perspective

'Nothing about us without us' (Charlton 1998) is a phrase often used by dis/ability activists that calls for greater involvement of people with disabilities in decision-making processes, as well as for greater social inclusion more generally. Unlike approaches characterised by the use of third-person perspective, the phenomenological framework's focus on personal narratives responds to this activist call, and thus the growing interest in its employment. Among these, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's ideas are of great significance for the study of lived experiences. Departing from the idea that immersion in the world (or in phenomenological terms, being-in-the-world) is necessarily embodied, Merleau-Ponty's seminal works suggest that not only is our relationship with the world embodied, but perception is, too. Merleau-Ponty has emphasised the situated and interpretative quality of knowledge about the world, stating that the physical and perceptive affordances of bodies take precedence over logical and abstract ones. In addition, Merleau-Ponty's view of the body as a condition for experience makes his work immensely relevant for contemporary approaches to embodied cognition, and especially so for the purposes of this analysis.

In this paper we particularly make use of Merleau-Ponty's concept of 'I can', and examine how it is relevant to subjects' involvement in projects. The 'I can' concept refers to the manner in which people experience their grip on the projects they are engaged in, as well as their immersion in the world, based on their capacity and habituality. Put simply, it refers to a kind of harmony between what we aim at and what is given between intention and performance (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 167). The meaning of ability in respondents' narratives of lived experiences is explored through the understanding of this concept as a negotiation between *I can* and *I cannot* or *I no longer can*, particularly by addressing the different ways in which persons with congenital and those with acquired blindness experience their dis/ability. Specifically, we explore the meaning of ability through themes such as risk taking, active handling, creativity, failure and its opposite. Merleau-Ponty's approach is further relevant as it also examines the ways in which subjects establish a grip on the world, or in other words, the ways in which subjects adjust to their surroundings. Even though the authors' writings about this issue do not explicitly come with a normative stance, the question concerning the grip on the world, as well as certain other aspects of Merleau-Ponty's work have been subjected to a critique. According to Scully (2008), Merleau-Ponty's account disregards the question of whether it is possible to establish an adequate grip on the world, and this question is of great relevance for our study. In addition, the author claims (Scully 2008: 94–95) that classical phenomenological thought obscures the fact that even people who are fully capable of operating in the world greatly differ in their capacity for certain perceptions or actions. Furthermore, besides being criticised for primary exploration of the meaning of *normative* embodiment (Grosz 1994; Scully 2008), Merleau-Ponty has been criticised for efforts to lay the foundations for a universal phenomenological ontology and for its incapacity to acknowledge any variation in the primary normative experience (Scully 2008). Though his analysis draws on Ludwig Binswanger's and Kurt Goldstein's works about neurological (i.e. pathological) embodiment, and includes examples such as the Schneider case (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 108) – a veteran who suffered from various kinds of physical and mental impairments due to brain damage – the critique claims that such examples only serve to provide a better understanding of *non-pathological* embodiment. This critique is of crucial importance for a project that argues that all bodies differ in their ability, yet we consider Merleau-Ponty's writings to still provide valuable resources for an analysis of dis/ability, since his argument does not rest exclusively on normative embodiment as many proponents strongly argue.

3. Methods

3.1. Study design

The first author has conducted fourteen interviews with fencers over a period of six months. Respondents were between ten and sixty years old, of different gender identifications, in different stages in their fencing careers, from beginners to Olympic champions. They were of various nationalities, including Polish, Swedish, Norwegian, Uruguayan and Chinese;

living in Sweden (greater Stockholm area) and Norway (Oslo). The decision to limit the study geographically to these two countries was made in consideration of cultural specificities and linguistic convenience. Only seven interviewees are visually impaired and blind, and thus participating in the special emerging category of fencing for the blind, while others are members of national teams in regular fencing. All of them are members of either the Fäktning för synskadade ('fencing for the blind') team in Stockholm, or of the Bygdø fencing club in Oslo. Fencers were contacted through the Swedish and Norwegian Fencing Federations and through the first author's personal contacts and former colleagues and friends from the fencing community.

The interviews were semi-structured, leaving space for interviewees to talk about topics of import to them. Among other things, topics ranged from exploring the way in which interviewees experience and *do* their blindness (Mol 2003). In addition, we talked about their everyday lives, families, hobbies and plans. Most interviews lasted from 45 minutes to an hour, and the first author met with the four interviewees who are blind three times. For the purposes of preserving their anonymity, fencers' names have been changed. The empirical data is documented in digital audio recordings. As some of the interviewees were younger than 16 years at the time of the interviews, we also obtained informed consent from their parents. Additionally, Norwegian national ethical approval was obtained from the NSD (Norsk Samfunnsvitenskapelig Datatjeneste/Norwegian Centre for Research Data).

The initial plan was to have a more varied sample and to also discuss the lived experience of fencers whose body schemas differ in various manners, including disfigurements and prosthetic limbs, as well as fencers who use wheelchairs. Due to restrictions within fencing categories, we were unable to find fencers that would be suitable for these purposes. There are no wheelchair fencing teams in Nordic countries, and the practice is less popular among people who have artificial limbs or similar enhancements than, for example, athletics or modelling. However, the decision to focus only on fencers who are visually impaired and blind arose spontaneously, as some very interesting topics and questions emerged in the course of the interviews. A smaller sample size allowed us to give sufficient attention to the participants, which provided us with rich qualitative data. Hence, this paper focuses only on the experiences of fencers who are blind and visually impaired. More precisely, we explore how people who are differently embodied make sense of their own embodiment and ability, as well as how they make sense of the world through the practice of fencing.

3.2. Interpretative phenomenological analysis

Respondents' accounts have been interpreted using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith 1996; Smith, Flowers & Larkin 2009; Smith & Osborne 2015; Oxley 2016). In addition to phenomenology, IPA is rooted in hermeneutics and idiography too. It is especially suited to the analysis of qualitative and experiential aspects of subjects, who are considered to be 'meaning makers' (Oxley 2016: 55). This method lends itself to analysis of the significance of crucial events in the life of a subject, as well as of the manner in which that person makes sense of these occurrences. In those terms, it is useful for the analysis of how fencers make sense of their own abilities and agency. The method is also increasingly relevant for studies of lived experiences of illnesses, disability and rehabilitation. This method observes subjects as unique individuals, giving each respondent's account adequate and sufficient attention. For these reasons, the method is suitable for the analysis of embodied experiences that are constructed as *differently able*. This method is phenomenological in the sense that it focuses on the first-person perspective and is thus useful and influential in advancing alternative ways of understanding the embodied self. The method thus requires researchers to investigate both the ways in which incarnated subjects understand their experiences, as well as the meaning that appears in and through interpretation of these narratives, and to pay special attention to the details of the context in which meaning arises.

Initially, all interviews were transcribed and re-read. The first author began the analysis by adding preliminary comments and by inductively summarising recurring topics. While attempting to remain open to novel insights and to become fully immersed in the data (Oxley 2016: 60), both authors have engaged in an exploration of underlying meanings in the respondents' accounts. To interpret the whole by looking at parts as well as of understanding parts by looking at the whole, we employed within-case and across-case analyses. Topics were re-organised and subsequently axially coded (Boeije 2010) according to our findings. Findings have been attributed open codes, such as 'difficult start', 'frustrations', 'ordinary life', 'use of other senses', 'actively coping', 'emotions', and 'risk taking', among others. While clustering and interpreting these codes (Smith, Flowers & Larkin 2009), we subsequently identified three major dimensions of the being-in-the-world of fencers who are blind and visually impaired.

In the endeavour to understand whether fencers who are blind and visually impaired perceive the world they live in as inaccessible or disabling, themselves as dis/abled or impaired, as well as what role fencing has in their lives, we must first identify how phenomenal bodies are lived in their varied experiences. By looking into whether and how lack of sight gives a person a unique perspective on the world, this analysis enquires into what kind of practices, tactics and habits they develop in order to not only endow their bodily doings with meaning, but to also make their everyday life more meaningful and fulfilled.

4. Findings

From our data we identified three ways of being-in-the-world: (I) first, directly related to the fact that visual impairments or blindness may cause disruptions of one's taken-for-granted being in the world, and may cause disorientation, we found that fencing may support various kinds of perceptual and motor reorientation in the world; (II) second, since

fencing often goes together with risk taking and excitement, fencers' relation to their world can also be described in terms of throwing oneself into one's world; and (III) third, in the degree to which fencing invites smooth movements and actions, it helps the participants to develop personal techniques and styles and thus get a firmer grip on the world.

4.1. Disruptions and reorientations

Due to a congenital condition, illness or accident, participants in this study are blind or visually impaired. This manifests as a distinct phenomenon for respondents in various ways in their everyday lives. In this sense, it disrupts the taken-for-grantedness of their bodies and world, starting from how they get around, how they feel, to the effects it has on their socialisation. In order to make their everyday lives more fulfilled and meaningful, respondents of the study develop various bodily habits. These new habits, reorientations of a sort, not only help them to navigate through their lives more smoothly, but also allow them to engage in projects and handle their world. In our conversations, participants often highlighted the relevance of creativity to the ways in which they make use of senses other than sight, as well as in learning. Reorientations and other strategies they employ increase their ability to perform tasks and participate in practices that in turn endow them with agency.

Loss of sight causes disruptions in daily routines and requires changes in certain bodily doings for respondents whose blindness is not congenital. A woman who has been losing her sight over the course of more than a decade, and is now only capable of distinguishing light from darkness and sometimes colours, describes how the disruption in sensory capacity also caused changes in the way she uses her time:

'When I first started using the cane [to aid her movement], I could still see a bit. However, it took me a while to get from one place to another, I wasn't sure if I will stumble upon something. It was similar with other things. I work in an office and the way I use my working hours is different. Some things I just do slower than I used to because I cannot really see. I stayed at the same company but I no longer have the same duties'. (Frida)

Frida's story has a strong undertone of commitment to actively handling her blindness. Being-in-the-world is a process, a journey; it is not only here-and-now but also something with an outlook of there-and-then. She is well aware of the choices she is making and that these are not simply given to her to passively withstand.

Unlike Frida, Patricia, a fifteen-year-old fencer who has been blind since her birth, does not seem to be bothered with the temporal dimension of navigating through her blindness. However, she finds it disorienting if she is deprived of other sensory inputs too when she wants to engage in simple everyday practices such as listening to music:

'One day I wanted to listen to music on my way from one classroom to another, so I put on headphones. It was quite disorienting, I was stumbling around as if I was drunk! Usually I listen to where other people are, how far, how many are they, but this way it was just impossible to steer through my school'. (Patricia)

Interestingly, interviewees do not all rely on the same combinations of sensory inputs, and therefore get disoriented and reorient themselves in different manners. They develop ways in which they make sense of the world according to their own needs and not according to a prescribed set of rules.

'I don't have any problems with my eyes', Bjorn says and laughs, 'I can't see anything!', as he continues to talk about his attempts to remember as much as possible of the soundscape as well as about the specific ways in which he makes sense of the world, especially while fencing:

'I'm not sure how to put this – sometimes I just feel the energy of things. There's this thing called echolocation, did you hear about it? I read a lot about it. I'm not really thinking "Hey, now I will use echolocation!" I just use it, I go around and I can *feel* where walls are, if there are some obstacles and such. Of course, I use my cane too. Now we are sitting next to a window; can you feel the heat from the sun? That's another kind of energy! But sometimes you need to put more effort and really try to paint your own picture of the stuff around you.' (Bjorn)

His account suggests that, though he has learned to use certain combinations of senses without conscious direction or planning the manner of their employment, he still tends to come up with novel and creative ways to make as accurate sense of his environment as possible.

According to the accounts of respondents who have either been blind for a long time or could never see at all, the use of other senses mostly arises spontaneously and without much conscious determination. They emphasise the abundance of other than visual cues and the importance of making use of what is offered by the environment. The combination of, for example, echolocation, touch and attentiveness to other inputs such as the temperature of sun or wind, compensates for lack of sight.

The fencers keenly describe the importance of reflecting on what they learn while fencing and of being creative while learning. Frida, whose blindness is not congenital, has to put in a bit more effort and plan her actions ahead. She describes the moment of realisation that progress has been made as rewarding. Use of other senses and the patience, reflection and effort put into learning seem to be the most commonly recurring themes in these interviews.

The respondents' stories of disorientation and disruption are mainly about their experiences in the world in general as people who live with visual impairment or blindness. Interestingly, the undertone of these narratives announces the reasons for emphasising the difference between everyday life and fencing experiences. In other words, the stories they tell about how they get disoriented rather serve to make a stronger point about the ways in which fencing influences their being-in-the-world.

In each of the interviews, respondents eagerly highlight the oddness of their involvement in fencing.

'After all, someone has entrusted you with a weapon knowing that you won't be able to see where you're headed in a room that is sometimes full of people who aren't protected with the gear', says Bjorn.

In addition, fencing helps the participants to habituate their bodies and the world in a number of interesting ways. For Frida, fencing is a practice that helps her to work on her posture, balance, and grip on her cane, as well to practice using their other senses. In addition, according to Patricia, it relieves stress and helps her and other fencers to fight depression by delivering adrenalin rushes that maybe otherwise lacking. Interviewees, who experience their dis/abilities in different ways, also report improvements in their general focus, and enhanced control over movement. Fencing endows its participants with opportunities to take risks and experience things directly, for themselves, but also to contemplate and reimagine the role of winning and loss in their lives.

4.2. Throwing oneself into the world

Fencing also seems to allow participants of the study to take the risk of doing something somewhat dangerous. Though modern fencing is far from the deadly practice it once was, the idea of participating in a duel excites the fencers and delivers an adrenalin rush they report they need. 'Adrenalin is the main reason I come back here every time', claims Patricia, who also noted the relevance of reflecting on what she has learned during a training or a duel:

'It is very strange to do something you can't really visualise. Most of the other things I do are quite straight-forward, skiing, music, riding a motorcycle. But there's this thing about fencing... Everyone speaks about how elegant it is, that fencers wear white, have nice movements, weapons, but I still can't grasp what it actually *looks like*. But it makes it quite fun, right? When I heard that people use swords, I wanted to do it! It is another one of my dangerous hobbies now!' (Bjorn)

Many respondents also speak passionately of curiosity and the need for openness to discover and take risks:

'You have to experience things on your own. It is one thing to hear my sister describing how it was for her to go down the slide and another to do it myself. I live for this feeling; the adrenalin rush is what makes everything worthwhile. I am not frightened anymore to go ahead and do stuff that people think blind people shouldn't be doing. You can't know if you can reach something until you try. It makes me so happy to put all the effort in wind surfing, to have my muscles sore and to go ahead and fence.' (Patricia)

The notion of risk taking is often accompanied by investments in projects in the interviewees' narratives. For George, pushing boundaries is an important personal endeavour, and he encourages fencers he trains to challenge their own limits. Boundary pushing and risk taking are closely related to the rewarding feeling an adrenalin rush gives to Bjorn, too. He enthusiastically speaks of the 'dangerous hobbies' (Bjorn) he is dedicated to, which is one of the main reasons he decided to try to fence.

However rewarding the excitement, adrenalin, and stress relief, or however beneficial it may be to the development of different skills, there is a downside to fencing for some of the respondents. Patricia speaks about the pain she feels in her feet as a consequence of pressuring them while balancing, about the bruises and marks on her body that she takes pride in while in the locker room after physical education class in school, and about how she is learning about her body while fencing. She tells me how upset she gets when she loses a tie, but also that the feeling does not ever overtake her:

'I tell myself that next time I am going to do it better, I will just do it! I think about it when I come home and I motivate myself, it is all part of the game. You have to lose sometimes to appreciate winning. Even when I have all this adrenalin rushing, I'm concentrated and I don't give up.' (Patricia)

Despite their investment in various projects, a reoccurring theme in our conversations with interviewees who are visually impaired is that the comparative lack of excitement in other parts of their lives can result in a rather gloomy everyday life. Patricia eagerly speaks about her experiences on a roller coaster and of jumping into a pool:

'I still remember the feeling of jumping into a pool, it was completely insane... I didn't want the feeling to go away! Just all the adrenalin rushing through my body, it was similar also when I was on a roller coaster; I want to feel like that every day! When I don't have this, it isn't just boring – it can also be depressing, and it's not every day that you can jump into a pool or have a ride on a roller coaster.' (Patricia)

Helena, who helps George organise trainings and manage the fencing club in general, talks about the community they have become:

'This is a safe space for everyone who joins, regardless how much you can see. It relieves us from stress. I recently talked with Patricia about how we don't feel depressed afterwards, it's a really good cure for that! And I can see especially with younger fencers how they get more and more confident. Not only to fence, but also to get engaged with their friends outside of the fencing hall.' (Helena)

Pain, loss and frustration are not only part of fencing, but of respondents' everyday lives too. However, the excitement they derive from adrenalin motivates them to throw themselves into the world. In addition, becoming engaged in a community of people who share not just similar impairments, but also interests and passion for fencing, or rather, 'throwing' oneself into socialisation in this way, is also how fencers gain agency through participation in this sport. Fencers do not characterise their losses or pain as failures, but are often led to feel even more confident and to get a firmer grip on the world.

4.3. Developing personal styles and getting a grip on the world

Occupying the threshold between sport and art, the practice of fencing is famous for graceful and sophisticated movements, as well as for requiring sharp focus, careful strategy and alertness. Frida, the only respondent who knows what this practice actually looks like, and also the most recent user of a cane, describes her experience of fencing:

'I saw fencers use their weapon and I can develop my technique according to that and to what George and other coaches tell me. And I realise that my grip on the cane is more firm after the training – I am not reluctant to spread my arm and feel the obstacles on the ground. I don't just go ahead and wave my épée in the air, I need to plan my actions and afterwards also think about what I did well, what I shouldn't have done and how to improve it.' (Frida)

Fencers who are blind and blindfolded cannot see their opponent, and all of the respondents report that this is somewhat confusing. They are often not sure how to approach opponents whose embodied endowments may differ greatly from their own – not only are they sometimes of a different age or gender, but they may also be significantly physically stronger or weaker, which is not something blindfolded fencers may initially and easily make sense of. Different opponents require different techniques, different amounts of strength are required for attack, even different use of the surrounding space. Several respondents eagerly suggest that hand shaking and a brief conversation before fencing should be considered part of the rules (George, Morten & Lars):

'It is insufficient to listen to the sound of épée blades crossing, or to the opponent's footwork or the strength they use while they swing their weapon. A simple "nice-to-meet-you" would reveal so much more and help me prepare for the attack or defense.' (Patricia)

For some, this lack of knowledge provokes curiosity and a challenge to be creative in finding new, winning techniques (Patricia, Bjorn).

Just like other fencers, Frida develops techniques and improves each time she fences, and is especially proud of the third place she took at a tournament recently as well as of how sharp her concentration is getting. She tells me about the international competition in France she is preparing for – her first – and all the adrenalin she is looking forward to:

'I see myself progress and coaches agree too. I have one goal: I want to be myself and do my best.' (Patricia)

Finally, she tells me about how she has incorporated specific techniques, and that she is able to perform them unconsciously now. Having her knees bent at all times was a struggle in the beginning; she had to remind herself constantly to remain in proper fencing posture. After seven months of fencing, she has habituated to her weapon and does not have to consciously direct her every action any longer. These are, rather, embodied – which leaves her with a lot more space to focus on how her opponent is fencing and the techniques they are using, and to prepare a suitable response.

The inability to see affects interviewees' everyday life in different ways, and sometimes disrupts their ability to immerse themselves fully in projects. The world fencers encounter is not made in an entirely accessible way for them, meaning that blindness appears as a particularly striking phenomenon in the lives of respondents of this study, and that it greatly affects their being-in-the-world. Despite the potential for blindness and partial sightedness to hinder person's immersion in everyday life, respondents to this study employ various strategies and develop new habits to handle their particular bodily endowment. As we demonstrated above, openness to seeking out and taking risks, curiosity, planning, putting effort into learning, and practicing concentration, control and focus are just some of the tactics respondents of the study use. In addition, they perceive and inhabit the world by relying on a rich array of other-than-visual-sensory inputs.

5. Discussion

5.1. Agency

Our findings suggest that respondents do not withstand their blindness or partial sightedness passively, but aspire to endow their bodily doings with meaning through various strategies, practices and habits they develop. Fencers gain agency through involvement in practices that require them to push boundaries and in turn provide them with excitement and adrenalin. They also exercise agency through actively handling and changing situations that they perceive as problematic. Risks and excitement thus seem to enrich fencers' being-in-the-world, and involvement in this practice as well as the enrichment of their *I can* contributes to their active inclusion in society. In addition, findings suggest that respondents enhance their ability through learning and, more importantly, by reflecting on what they have learned. Engagement in projects is another way, according to our findings, for respondents to handle their blindness and reorient themselves despite what is, for some, a disruptive condition.

Fencers' self-perception and self-representations seem to strongly depend on other's opinions, but involvement in fencing appears to give them agency and they thus feel more confident throwing themselves into the world. This involvement influences their 'I can', and they are more apt to take initiative and change their situation, to interact with the world without overthinking it, to be more open and to feel better. Fencers seem to take into account failures, too, and try to make sense of why they happen, both in their social life and in fencing. Some of them speak about their engagement in this practice as a kind of a journey they have embarked on, yet enjoying the here-and-now of it. They notice how the shapes of their bodies change and they also make sense of it differently in different situations.

5.2. Dis/ability

Not only does fencing impact the sense of agency fencers have by providing them with adrenalin and excitement, but it also aids in their efforts to improve balance and posture and to attune their senses more finely. Respondents' fencing bodies that lack one particular sense are very much situated, and the practice of fencing is something that helps them to ascribe identity to it. These embodied subjects are attuned in their interactions and encounters in the sense that reflections become bodily doings, they are 'intelligence in the flesh' (Blackman 2008: 53), resulting in their ability to affect and be affected.

Both in their everyday lives as well as while fencing, interviewees become disoriented by different things in their surroundings: noise, lack of sounds or visual cues or simply excitement. Sara Ahmed argues that moments of disorientation are crucial:

'Disorientation as a bodily feeling can be unsettling, and it can shatter one's sense of confidence in the ground or one's belief that the ground on which we reside can support the actions that make a life liveable. Such a feeling of shattering, or of being shattered, might persist and become a crisis. Or the feeling itself might pass and the ground returns or as we return to the ground. The body might be reoriented if the hand that reaches out finds something to steady an action.' (Ahmed 2006: 157)

Fencers' feelings of being disoriented sometimes linger and become a common feeling, one that has the potential to shape both what is socially and bodily given (Ahmed 2006: 158). Their 'I can' proceeds from overcoming disorientation. When they reorient themselves within the world, respondents habituate their weapon of choice the same way they once habituated a cane. It replaces their eyes and becomes an organ of sight that helps them build pictures. Due to this habituatedness to a cane, they usually do not find it difficult to learn to use *épée*. Both are now integrated in their body schemas and in a certain sense define the reach of their existence. There is a certain element of forgetfulness in their use of these objects – they seem to have incorporated them and their bodies know better than their intellects how to use them in order to either find a way around or make a point while fencing.

Respondents learn to be patient and to habituate to bodily changes one day at a time. They are also learning to change the way they are directed towards the world and the way they handle everyday tasks. Some tasks call for different ways of doing than those they are used to, and fencing too calls for a different way of *doing* their bodies – their embodied intentionality as well as their *I can* has changed. However, they by no means consider themselves dis/able – they very much have the ability to handle tasks as well as to participate in society.

In his development of a phenomenological model of disability, Martiny argues that the reason people who are congenitally blind do not necessarily experience their blindness as a form of disability or illness is because they have developed a manner in which they are immersed in the world according to their own dis/ability (Martiny 2015: 9). Our findings demonstrate that respondents' unusual embodiment does not hinder their being-in-the-world and they do not feel dis/abled as long as they make use of their own specific perceptual affordances and bodily endowments, and so long as they also make use of their own strategies to seamlessly immerse into their everyday lives.

All bodies differ in their ability, and different kinds of bodies have different kinds of corporeal schema. One's dis/abled body is as normal and functional to its subject as other *able* bodies are to theirs (Scully 2008: 94). Our findings suggest that being/having a blind body does not constitute an embodiment that is more different than, for example, left-handed fencing body would be. Arguing that fencing merely contributes to respondents' rehabilitation would not do the situation justice either, as the notion of rehabilitation bears somewhat normative connotations. Rehabilitation calls

for inhabiting a mode of being that a rather small number of people can actually embody. In this case, it also calls for the employment of certain sets of perceptual affordances that a sighted person would otherwise make use of, and this is not necessarily as useful for persons who are blind or visually impaired. Thus, instead of rehabilitating to the norm (which echoes with a sort of uncanniness), perhaps fencing, as well as the other strategies that respondents find useful, contribute to *rehab/ituation*. Conceptualising the renewal or rearrangement of one's body schema according to one's own affordances, which is present in the concept of rehab/ituation instead of rehabilitation, opens up a space for a more creative, productive and inclusive way of being-in-the-world. Put simply, when a person fences in a way that allows them to employ senses that are spontaneous for them, they fully rehab/ituate their blindness as well as their embodiment in a manner that is most comfortable for them and that offers the most environmental cues. Fencers who lack sight know much better how to rely on echolocation and can better distinguish sounds from one another, and the advice of a sighted person cannot always or fully comprehend, anticipate and encompass this. Sighted persons' advice thus contributes to rehabilitation to a sighted world, which is sometimes less abundant with perceptual affordances for those who lack sight.

5.3. Failures and mis/fitting

Crippling³ the notion of rehabilitation and understanding it as a non-normative rehab/ituation, opens space for understanding *I cannot* as different from failure. Endowed with what bears normative assumptions of failure, which is nothing but the lack of a single sense, for fencers this *failure* represents an opportunity rather than a dead end. And, as Halberstam writes, fencers 'work with rather than against failure' (Halberstam 2011: 96). Respondents' accounts of adrenaline, excitement and the ways in which they throw themselves into the world represent a refusal of not-being-able – of being disabled; they embody disability trouble (Halberstam 2011: 96). The body of a fencer, like that of a performer, becomes an archive of improvised cultural responses to the conventional constructions of gender, race, sexuality, and dis/ability, and the performance articulates powerful modes of dissent and resistance (Halberstam 2011: 97).

Ability and dis/ability, placed between material realities and social constructions, are not fixed conditions. Ways in which the built world and a person's bodily capacities come to engage with each other create different kinds of fits and misfits – concepts crucial for some materialist feminist conceptions of disability (Garland-Thomson 2011; Pitts-Taylor 2016). Garland-Thomson describes misfitting as a 'shifting spatial and perpetually temporal relationship that confers agency and value on disabled subjects at risk of social devaluation by highlighting adaptability, resourcefulness, subjugated knowledge as potential effects of misfitting' (Garland-Thomson 2011: 592). Our respondents' stories of intelligence in the flesh, know-how and the *I can* are stories of fitting, whereas disorientations and disruptions represent misfittings of a sort. The use of specific sets of perceptual cues allows fencers to smoothly create fits in their everyday lives. Returning to the difference between rehabilitation and rehab/ituation – whereas rehabilitation presupposes prescribed, normative fits, and thus sort of 'pushes a square peg into a round hole' (Garland-Thomson 2011: 592–593), rehab/ituation allows for a specific embodiment and the environment to actually create a fit according to these specific embodied endowments and requirements of the situation. Mis/fitting in a place of disability emphasises the relevance of context over essence, and both fitting and misfitting occur within a certain spectrum that creates specific consequences (Garland-Thomson 2011: 595).

6. Conclusion

In our analysis of interviews conducted for this study, we focused on the lived nature of subjects' engagement in projects. The interviewees do not withstand their limitedness or lack of sight passively, and thus their bodies are not just surfaces on which social signifiers are inscribed. Handling their unusual embodied endowment means that each of them develops different ways of 'doing' their bodies anew. Their investment in hobbies that require them to use and further develop other affordances endows them with agency. Not only does risk taking provide an opportunity to experience the world in ways that are otherwise inaccessible and would remain outside of their reach, but the idea of participating in an unusual thing also provides these fencers with excitement that is lacking in many of their/our everyday lives. The environment as well as the objects in it not only occur to them differently than to persons who are fully sighted, but also differently from how they used to occur before the fencer lost vision (in cases where subjects were not born with blindness or visual impairment). It may be argued that, in fact, they do not inhabit the same world as before. However, the new kinds of fits and misfits they create with the environment do not necessarily cause them to feel disabled. Participation in fencing, characterised by its requirement of other senses than sight, seems to improve respondents' ability to inhabit their blind body, to rehab/ituate it, and thus to be fully immersed in the world.

Ethical and Consent

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

³ Robert McRuer developed notions of *crip* and *cripping* in his work within dis/ability and queer studies. The notion emerges from the tradition of cultural studies that 'question[s] the order of things, considering how and why it is constructed and naturalised; how it is embedded in complex economic, social, and cultural relations; and how it might be changed' (McRuer 2006: 2).

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Consent was also obtained from parents of underage participants.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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