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'Everybody with Disability Should be Included': A Qualitative Interview Study of Athletes' Experiences of Disability Sports Participation Analysed with Ideas of Able-Mindedness

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Inspired by ideas of able-mindedness, this study explored athletes' experiences of participation in disability sports. The athletes included were active members in sports clubs targeting people with intellectual disability. The study focused on their perspectives on and understanding of participation, as well as on their accounts of positioning and self-identification, in disability sports. In all, 17 athletes were interviewed. Using thematic analysis, three themes were singled out: identity construction and positioning, the (dis)able-minded athlete and facilitation of participation through others. The results show that participation influences identity construction and is a basis for a common athletic identity. This study offers important knowledge for the facilitation of participation and for the elucidation of able-mindedness in disability sports.

Keywords: participation; intellectual disability; disability sports; able-mindedness; identity

Introduction

Sports involve large segments of the world's population—that is, people with different backgrounds, motivations and abilities. In addition, sports are a social activity that enables a sense of individual and collective self, meaningfulness and participation. That said, sports, and more specifically the social interaction it entails, is an arena for participation and identity construction for those involved (Guerrero & Martin 2018). Studies show that people with intellectual disability (ID) have been excluded from sports activities (Hassan et al. 2012) and have far from equal opportunities to participate in sports. Yet, research on disability sports participation among athletes with ID and on the role played by sports activities in their participation in wider society remains limited (Pack, Kelly & Arvinen-Barrow 2017).

In Sweden, most sports targeting people with ID are organised within the Swedish Para Sports Confederation (SPSC). Regardless of whether athletes are involved in leisure or professional sports or in sports targeting people with or without ID, performances and able-bodiedness are inherently present and achievements are displayed for others to judge and criticise (Apelmo 2012b; Smith et al. 2015).

Sports are a powerful social institution that, besides its positive qualities within which social structures and power relations are reproduced, hosts pejorative constructions of ID (Apelmo 2019; Goodley 2013; Smith et al. 2015) founded on able-mindedness. Social organising practices of able-mindedness label some individuals as different and maintains societal inequalities within systems (dis)ability, that is, an overarching social system of contextual boundaries between ability and disability that highlights the mutual dependency of disability and ability to define one another (Goodley 2014; Schalke 2018). Able-mindedness entails that which is not associated with sufficient physical functioning or appearances but rather normalising practices and assumptions towards intellectual and cognitive abilities (Kafer 2013; Taylor 2015). Athletes subjected to able-mindedness can have their athletic performances diminished, attention drawn to impairments and participation hindered (Apelmo 2019; Smith et al. 2015). Moreover, ample research suggests that people with ID labels lack the same opportunities to access sports facilities and participate in sports activities as people without these labels (McConkey 2016; Melbøe & Ytterhus 2017; SPSC 2016; The Swedish Agency for Participation 2015; Tint, Thomson & Weiss 2017).

The sports context reproduces power hierarchies and maintains restrictive and critical views of disability (Swartz et al. 2018). This can lead to 'othering' and the marginalisation of, as well as labels of deviance being attributed to, athletes in disability sports (Apelmo 2014). However, sports organisations targeting people with ID can facilitate participation and increase independence and self-esteem (Smith et al. 2015), which can promote athletes' positions and identities in the disability sports context (Smith et al. 2015; Swartz et al. 2018).

Limited research has been conducted on how athletes in sports clubs targeting people with ID perceive their own participation in disability sports, and little attention has been paid to theoretical perspectives on able-mindedness in relation to disability sports.

Against this background, this study explores athletes', who are active members of sports clubs targeting people with ID, experiences of participation in disability sports. This study takes its standpoint in the theoretical perspective of able-mindedness and its interaction with (dis)ability. The following questions were addressed to meet this objective:

- How is participation expressed by the athletes?
- How do the athletes see themselves in disability sports?
- How does able-mindedness affect disability sports?

Previous research

Ambiguous binary meanings on disability sports

The United Nations (UN) Convention on the right of persons with disabilities' Article 30 and the Swedish Sports Confederation (SSC) both state that people with ID should have the same opportunities on an equal basis with others for access in sports activities and facilities (SSC 2009; United Nations 2008). Disability sports were developed based on the ideals of equal, democratic rights to participation (Valet 2018), and many disability sports organisations, such as the Special Olympics and Paralympics, work to facilitate participation (Hassan, McConkey & Dowling 2014). Yet, participation in disability sports can be constrained or belittled by institutional power relations and hegemonic views of the body and mind (Héas 2015), and Smith et al. (2015) found that participation in disability sports can ameliorate experiences of stigmatisation due to the normalising assumptions of able-mindedness. Thus, in public discourse, there is a prevalent sports–disability binary, one that both draws upon and reinforces a predominant therapeutic and rehabilitative view of disability sports (Rees, Robinson & Shields 2017).

Participation in disability sports can expand athletes' social networks, develop social relationships, facilitate learning and improve their physical and psychological health (McConkey 2016; SPSC 2016; Tint, Thomson & Weiss 2017). According to Liu (2009: 329),

Participation [in disability sports] can provide the context within which people exceed the expectations associated with their disability through demonstration of physical skills or fitness, so emphasizing an alternative, more positive, picture of the body and self.

At the same time, disability sports can induce pressure to perform and to do things some individuals cannot, which can in turn fuel feelings of marginalisation (Apelmo 2014). When athletes cannot live up to normative performances and able-minded ideals, they may be excluded, creating situations in which participation is diminished (c.f. Kafer 2013; Smith et al. 2015).

Sports activities are believed to foster democratic citizens, encourage a positive body image, create meaningful activities and facilitate a competitive spirit, better performance and athleticism. These views are constructed and upheld by athletes, coaches, audiences, referees and the media (Stier 2005; Wickman 2008), as well as by practices (e.g., competition, challenge, expression, play, recreation and training) (Engström 2010) and culture of able-mindedness, in which normalising assumptions and practices are directed towards intellectual and cognitive abilities (Kafer 2013); by others, athletes are judged in relation to other athletes.

Other people's influence on athletes

For athletes with ID (and athletes without ID), coaches are highly influential people who represent hierarchal and uneven power relations. Coaches are in a position of authority, and they have a strong impact on athletes' identity construction and behaviours, such as by providing structures and opportunities for involvement. This authority affects the athletes' sense of autonomy, competence and performance, thereby strongly influencing their participation (Hassan et al. 2012; Hassan & Lynch 2014). Coaches can use their authoritarian position to facilitate athletes' social interactions and decision making or to pressure athletes to comply and behave in certain ways, levying participation as an exercise of power (Hassan & Lynch 2014). Exercising this power can involve reprimanding those who deviate from the norm and recasting participation as a way of oppressing and controlling (Foucault 1995). However, coaches' influential role for athletes in disability sports can also inspire independence and facilitate participation, rendering disability sports an arena for inclusion (Hassan et al. 2012).

Although some people with ID are dependent on others when choosing and accessing leisure and sports activities (Kittay 2011; Merrells, Buchanan & Waters 2018), ascribed labels of ID do not inevitably lead to dependence (Apelmo 2012b). People with ID labels are often perceived as vulnerable and in need of help and thus can remain embedded

in cultural patterns rooted in differences, impairments and social exclusion, which can lead to overprotection and subordinated power positions (Sanders 2006). Sports activities tend to have low status in disability services, and one reason can be trustees', caregivers' and social care professionals' lack of knowledge of the benefits and meaning of participation in sports activities (McConkey 2016).

Helpless or hero

People with disabilities are among the most marginalised people in society, as they can be viewed as deviating from able-minded norms and are thereby assigned pejorative labels, which enforce identities on individuals (Hardin & Hardin 2004; Hassan et al. 2012). Disability is constructed in relation to abilities, norms and functional bodies and minds (Kafer 2013; McRuer 2006; Taylor 2015), and Ljuslinder (2002) discusses that people with ID can be viewed as deviant in light of able-mindedness based on an assessment of individuals' intellectual and cognitive abilities.

The viewpoint of disability as an identity has created perceptions of athletes with ID labels as being 'supercrip' (Clare 2009), that is the athletes are commended for mundane achievements and celebrated as heroes merely for participating in sports activities (Hardin & Hardin 2004). Supercrip is a label embedded in the able-bodied and able-minded oppression of 'the disabled body and mind' (Clare 2009; Schalk 2016; Wendell 1989). Thus, ID is viewed as violating the norm as well as that which is considered normal (Löfgren-Mårtensson 2013; McRuer 2006; Schalk 2016).

The narrative of supercrip can both inspire athletes and diminish their performance by portraying them as helpless or as heroes (Hardin & Hardin 2004; Hassan & Lynch 2014; Pack, Kelly & Arvinen-Barrow 2017; Schalk 2016). People with ID labels are judged and assessed in terms of what they cannot do rather than what they can do, meaning that ID plays a major role in identity construction and labelling; narratives of supercrip push the boundaries of ID (McRuer 2006; Schalk 2016). In addition, Pack, Kelly and Arvinen-Barrow (2017) and Smith et al. (2015) showed that an athletic identity is pervasive and creates positive impressions, regardless of disability or ability, and can help overcome disablist attitudes (Guerrero & Martin 2018). On the other hand, sports targeting people with ID can reinforce social exclusion and perpetuate able-minded norms (Héas 2015; McConkey et al. 2013). Exclusion from sports activities can be derived from stigmatisation and the labelling of ID as deviant; thus, some athletic achievements can be viewed as abnormal, while others are considered the norm and desirable (Schalk 2016; Wendell 1989). One way to move away from and eliminate marginalisation is for athletes to be viewed as athletes, not as *disabled* athletes (Hassan & Lynch 2014; McConkey et al. 2013).

Method and Theory

Research participants and data collection

In this study, a qualitative interview design was used to obtain in-depth data from the interviewees, including 17 athletes, of whom 11 were men and 6 were women, aged 19 to 51 years.

The inclusion criteria were that the athletes were active members of sports clubs targeting people with ID and were registered with the SSC and the SPSC (Being part of a sports club targeting people with ID presupposes a diagnosis of ID, and the SPSC defines ID as difficulties in handling everyday life due to reduced intellectual, adaptive and cognitive abilities [SPSC, 2016]). Although there are few sports clubs targeting solely athletes with ID (in comparison to sports clubs targeting athletes without ID), a discussion with regional branches of the SSC and SPSC yielded five sports clubs in two Swedish counties, which were ultimately selected. In these sports clubs, the athletes were randomly asked for their research participation. The sports clubs were two floorball clubs, one of which was only for women, and an athletics, bowling and football club.

Moreover, Larsson's (2009) ideas about maximising variations guided the selection of interview participants. Thus, both women and men from individual and team sports, as well as from clubs for women, men or both, were selected. The interviewees had varied experiences; some had been involved in disability sports for 2 years, whereas others for over 20.

The interviews took place between September and November 2017. Around one-half of the athletes had experience from sports that did not especially target people with ID. All athletes had been active in sports clubs targeting people with ID for an average of 10 years. The athletes trained one to two times a week, and most athletes participated in sports activities with recreational purposes and competed in a few regional competitions a year, although one athlete was a Special Olympics medallist. Prior to the interviews, the sports clubs were visited during a training session, and the athletes were given information about the study's aim and ethical rights. By watching the training and talking to the athletes and coaches, the first author became acquainted with the research context. The athletes had approximately one week to consider the study's aim and to decide whether to participate before the first author visited the sports clubs a second time, whereupon written and oral consent were obtained. The interviews were conducted in connection with the athletes' regular training, in a quiet, empty locker room; in a secluded part of the arena's stands; or in another quiet and secluded place, outside the sports and training facilities, as selected by the athletes.

The interviews had a flexible, informal design, which Burgess (1984) called 'interviews as conversation', and they ran for between 10 and 60 minutes, lasting 22 minutes on average. The questions were open-ended:

- 'Can you please tell me about yourself?'
- 'Can you tell me about your sports?'
- 'How would you describe participation?'

Subsequently, probing questions were asked, such as

- 'Can you explain ...?'
- 'What do you mean by ...?'
- 'Can you describe ...?'

Trustworthiness

At a general level, extensive personal experiences and verbal ability play a vital role in the extent to which detailed accounts can be given. ID entails cognitive limitations that can impact the length of the interviews, the level of verbal skills, the degree of detail, the amount of descriptive information pertaining to the interview situation and tendencies for acquiescence. However, this does not mean that such accounts have less value (Beail & Williams 2014; Sigstad 2014). Accordingly, open-ended questions with follow-up questions, repetitions and reformulations were used and modifiers or negative wording were avoided (Hollomotz 2018). Kvale (1997) states that there is no set limit on how many interviews one should conduct—on the contrary, one should conduct as many interviews as necessary to determine what is being sought. Moreover, the first author's presence and interactions with the athletes, both before and after the interviews (c.f. Lincoln and Guba 1985), created an understanding of the athletes' social context and established confidence and trust with them (Hollomotz 2018).

Theoretical perspective

There are many ideas about how sports should be, how athletes should behave and perform and what constitutes a capable body and mind. These ideas consequently influence the way athletes construct their identities (Wickman 2008). Identities are developed based on the position of the person and others in given contexts and in relation to accordant social norms and values. Thus, the power relations between individuals and context affect access to and the legitimacy of contextual phenomena, such as participation. The human body and mind are the foremost symbols for who one is (i.e., one's identity), and these symbols are constructed and maintained in relation to contexts (Cooley 1902; Smith et al. 2015). Society focuses not only on any body or any mind, but on the *able*-body and *able*-mind when attributing labels (Campbell 2012; Smith et al. 2015). Any time bodies and minds and their expressions are inconsistent with normative views of behaviour or thinking, they can be labelled as deviant (Becker 1997).

There is an able-bodied focus in sports and in disability sports, but as Shildrick (2015) discusses, 'Why should our bodies end at the skin?' The body and mind are not dichotomous but mutually dependent. Thus, this study draws upon notions of able-mindedness, which derive from crip theory (c.f. McRuer 2006) and feminist disability studies (c.f. Garland-Thomson 2002; c.f. Kafer 2013; c.f. Taylor 2015), as its theoretical perspective. Able-mindedness hosts socially constructed norms of mental capacity and ability and can be viewed as normalising practices that label people as deviant or different due to cognitive or intellectual abilities (Schalk 2018; Taylor 2015).

The sports context can hold views of able-mindedness, deviant labelling and pejorative attitudes or it can encourage and strengthen positive attitudes towards athletes in disability sports. Therefore, the focus of the analysis was on critical views of the construction of normality, labelling, mainstream views of disability and the recognition of the importance of identity construction (Kafer 2013; Löfgren-Mårtensson 2013; McRuer 2006). Thus, the study critically examines taken-for-granted boundaries of normality (Löfgren-Mårtensson 2013), as well as the notion of able-minded as being the opposite of disability (Kafer 2013). Garland-Thomson (2002) argues that disability is used as a cultural trope in the interpretation of the materiality of the body and mind and bodily and cognitive differences. By 'using' oppressive and normalising practices, labels and ideas about disability, athletes can reconstruct or deconstruct identities and positions that were first constructed in relation to able-minded/-bodied norms (Kafer 2013; Wickman 2007, 2008).

Presentation and analysis of results

The athletes' names were changed to numbers, ranging from 1 to 17. Words within square brackets in the quotations signify additions made by the authors to clarify contextual meaning. All quotations were translated from Swedish to English. The quotations were thus altered to fit the structure and meanings of the English language. The identified themes were reviewed and cross-checked at multiple research seminars and at a national conference for social work research.

Anchored in theory (Braun & Clarke 2006), the interviews were analysed thematically. Thematic analysis focuses on identifying patterned meanings across a dataset (Kvale 1997), and it was used in this study because of its flexibility and emphasis on research participants and their views. The recorded interviews were first transcribed verbatim, then read thoroughly several times to obtain familiarity with the data. The data were then coded (i.e., an abstraction of data extracts) to identify latent patterns and meanings according to the study's objectives. The codes were constructed from the data in relation to the research questions and theoretical approach. Based on the codes, themes were identified.

Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the Ethical Board of Uppsala, Sweden (dnr: 2015/391), and the research adhered to the ethical regulations and guidelines of the Swedish Research Council's description of good research practice. Consistent with the principle of informed consent, the athletes in the study received oral and written information about the study,

as well as statements clarifying that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw participation at any time. If they did not comprehend the information and/or could not give their informed consent, trustees, legal guardians or close relatives were consulted (Swedish Research Council 2017; CODEX 2019). The information provided was in an easy-to-read format (Swedish Agency for Accessible Media 2017).

Given the target group, it is difficult to determine the extent to and ways in which the interviewer–interviewee power asymmetry affects the interview situation. It is clear that the interviewer initiated the interview, determined the topic, asked questions and critically scrutinised the answers. However, the open and informal interview design and the interviewees' choice of interview location allowed them to exercise relative control over the situation. To ease (or beneficially use) the power asymmetry (c.f. Vähäsantanen & Saarinen 2012), the interviewer used self-disclosure (sharing experiences, answering questions and expressing feelings) and acknowledged the interviewees' personal experiences of participation to create a comfortable and fruitful atmosphere.

Results

The results were designated as three themes: 1) identity construction and positioning, which is about sports' role for athletic and disabled identities and how it facilitates or hinders participation; 2) the (dis)able-minded athlete describes how sports practices able-mindedness; and 3) the facilitation of participation for others, descriptions of the mutual dependence between coaches and athletes and disabilities' relation to sports activities. The results consist of the athlete's own statements together with critical reflections anchored in theory.

Identity construction and positioning

Sports activities can be viewed as an integral part of the athletes' everyday lives, serving as a means through which they can express who they are and what they like to do. As one interviewee stated, '[Sports] are a part of describing myself, cannot be without it. That is how it feels. When we do not train, I get sad' (2). Another interviewee added, 'It is kind of about my life if you say so. It is what I love to do. That [floorball] and football. We have a disability team in a disability association' (12), while a third interviewee remarked, 'Floorball is my thing. It is my social thing' (3).

Some of the athletes believed they would have a hard time imagining a life without sports activities, and the aspects connected to an athletic identity. Disability sports create opportunities to engage in social relationships and with practical ideas about participation, such as taking part in training sessions, receiving a pass in football, influencing which athletic event in which to participate or using one's voice for self-positioning. Participation in disability sports facilitates how athletes define and express themselves; thus, disability sports represent a context in which athletes can feel accepted for who they are. Several athletes had experiences with both sports targeting people with ID and sports targeting people without ID. These experiences strengthened the athletes' athletic identity within the disability sports context.

The integral role played by sports activities in one's athletic identity was mentioned when the athletes were talking about everyone's right to participation. As one interviewee said:

Well, it is a way to get to know new people. I try to include others [...] I am shy. I try to get over it, but it takes time. I find it hard to meet new people. But all people are nice. (2)

When asked to describe their sports, several athletes stressed how important social relationships were, as well as how these relationships created a shared athletic identity. Several athletes claimed that everyone should be able to participate in disability sports, regardless of disability or skill. However, inclusion in disability sports was paralleled by feelings of exclusion from other sports domains.

Athletic identity provides athletes with the confidence needed to be who they are. As one participant stated:

It is fun that everybody feels accepted. It [football] is not about our deficits; instead, football is fun [...] It is as much about getting to show yourself and being proud of yourself and that you are doing something good. (6)

The interviewed athletes talked about how having an ID labelled them as different, with one stating, 'I have an intellectual disability. Mild intellectual disability. So, to [learn], get things stuck in the head, I need help [when doing sports activities]' (12). Another athlete asserted, 'Yes, I write [in my book] about the disorder I have. I am not like everyone else' (14). However, one athlete also talked about how disability sports accepts everyone: 'An important part of the development [of disability sports] is to encourage youths not to be ashamed of your disability, because everybody has the same value in sports' (6).

The construction of an athletic identity could be derived from feelings of being different from everyone else and thereby deviating from able-minded norms. The athletic identity directed some athletes towards disability sports, which provided them with a context in which they were accepted for who they are. At the same time, however, this meant that they were being directed away from something else—from other sports domains. As one interviewee said:

Participation in the team means that you get accepted for who you are. You do not get accepted or excluded because of something but are accepted for your personality and for who you are. People can see that, in our series, everybody is welcome. (6)

To the athletes, ID can be stigmatised by others, creating feelings of being different (i.e., dynamics of othering); yet, the stigma is also a way to reclaim and strengthen their position in disability sports. As one interviewee commented:

It was hard in the beginning when I had intellectual disability. I did not know that I had it. It was in ninth grade. The teacher decided to display us, so that we could see for ourselves that we should accept intellectual disability, understand what it is. I felt proud. But afterwards, [the teacher said] 'You do not have an intellectual disability'. I became very angry. I thought I was going to be happy, but I was angry. (2)

In the extract above, the athlete is struggling for belonging and identity. Later, the athlete was diagnosed as having ID, which directed her towards schools targeting students with ID and which in turn invited her to disability sports. Another athlete said, 'Everybody with some kind of disability can come and try floorball ... It's a form of disability, a mild intellectual disability. Because it is like a disability club' (13). The athlete emphasised that in disability sports, everybody with a disability is welcome.

In summary, the athletes' position and identification within disability sports rather than *just* sports subordinate normative constructions of belonging, that is, if you have an ID, you are supposed to be part of disability sports. Furthermore, able-mindedness stigmatises and marginalises the athletes, but participation in sport activities is a way for the athletes to express who they are. In addition, belonging in disability sports and engaging in its social interactions are connected to the construction of an athletic identity.

The (dis)able-minded athlete

Several athletes stated that regardless of abilities or capabilities, everyone should be included in sports activities, and disability sports represent a context in which they can feel safe. One interviewee said, 'Everybody can participate. Even those who are not that good can participate. Even if you are bad [at specific sports activities], you can participate. Nobody is ostracised' (5). Another athlete reported:

Participation is when everybody can participate, regardless of disability; everybody should be able to train and play even if they have Down syndrome or are in a wheelchair. Everybody with disability should be included. You should not point out someone [as being different] because he or she has a disability. (12)

The athletes meant that accessibility to and participation in sports activities should not be restricted due to disability, and participation should be facilitated through athletic performances, but without able-minded judgement. One interviewee remarked, 'If your body does not work properly or behaves in a certain way because you have Down syndrome or mild CP [cerebral palsy] damage, you are still a part of the team' (6). Some athletes feel that disability sports neglect stigmatised labelling, thereby becoming an arena in which athletes can express themselves without pressure from the able-minded ideals of performances typical of the sports context. Concerning this, one athlete said, 'I think it is fun to play football. I do different things. I feel safe here in this place' (15). The athletes mentioned disability sports as representing a safe place, one in which everyone can participate regardless of disabilities or abilities. Although the body and mind are judged in relation to athletic performance, one athlete claimed:

There are those who are better than I am, and I have to be better than them. If I tackle somebody in floorball, I get respect. Respect is important. In the beginning [when I began doing sports activities], I was weak when I started. Before, I was bad [at sports activities]. (5)

On the same topic another interviewee observed, 'They [teammates] stand in the goal area and do nothing. Everybody that plays on our team has different disabilities, which you see during training and all that. They must do their part [and] stay in their positions' (7). The judgement of and performance in comparison to other athletes are based on what the athletes can do in relation to disability; different abilities create different possibilities.

Several athletes asserted that no athlete should be excluded because of attributed ID labels, with one contending that 'those in the real world exclude those with a disability in different settings, and I can answer, yes, that is the case' (6). The same participant said, 'If you see a guy acting a little different, he is not classified as normal but classified as deviant because he is not like us. Football [in disability sports] is not like that' (6). Thus, disability sports include those individuals excluded from 'regular' sports due to their disability or behaviour. That said, the inclusive environment provided by disability sports comes from the exclusive environment outside disability sports, in which the athletes can feel marginalised and separated from other sports domains because of other people's differentiation. ID can thus simultaneously be a stigmatised label and a facilitator for community and athletic identity. The interviewees reported being categorised in an ableist fashion into disability sports, thereby being excluded from certain sports domains due to their differences.

For the athletes, disability sports facilitate social relationships and networks. As one athlete mentioned, 'You get to meet a lot of different people. Because we train within disability [sports], so you meet many different kinds of people who are good in different ways. Everybody is doing their best' (3).

In sum, disability sports are inclusive of people subjected to able-mindedness; their perceived 'otherness' thus facilitates participation and social relationships. Disability sports are formulated as a sports domain void of normative judgement.

Facilitation of participation for others

Coaches play a central, authoritarian role with respect to athletes, and they influence athletes' performances. The athletes are assessed based on what they can do instead of what they cannot do. As one interviewee stated, 'They [the coaches] talk to me, to everybody, about how we should behave. If we play badly, then we have to pass [the ball] better next time' (4). Most decisions go through the coaches; therefore, the athletes stressed how important their coaches were to their clubs' atmosphere. Coaches influence athletes' level of motivation and protect them from pejorative attributions. As one participant shared, 'We have always had good coaches who support us and fight for us. Then you get more motivated to get results' (6).

The athletes alter and adjust training and competitive situations to encourage and facilitate participation for other athletes. One interviewee said, 'They know that we will let them have the ball a little, so now they are participating and having fun. That is the important part. Participation is that you have fun' (6). Another athlete said, 'We help each other on the team [and] try to encourage our teammates. You can do that now: pass the ball around, try to find spaces and try to find each other. [We] see where we have each other when we play' (15). Sports activities are thus constructed based on ideas of what the individual can do in relation to their abilities or disabilities. The athletes actively help and facilitate the construction of an athletic identity for both themselves and others by seeing and helping each other. Participation through others was facilitated via the athletes' diversity and different abilities; there was a relaxed atmosphere with no pressure to live up to normative athletic performances.

ID encompasses cognitive variations that affect the athletes' relation to able-mindedness. As one athlete said, 'Yes it goes a bit slow. Some people learn really fast. But it goes slower with intellectual disability' (12). Another participant commented:

It takes time to learn new things. It always does. When we learn new things in floorball, we take our time—in peace and quiet—so everybody can keep up. It [activities and training sessions] takes longer but nobody gets stressed that you should be able to know it fast. (2)

Some athletes reported learning difficulties as an inconvenience, but in the disability sports context, such difficulties were not a problem. Although cognitive variations could be marginalising outside disability sports, one athlete said, 'Nobody wants to hang out with somebody who has special needs [...] I learn different things depending on what I want to learn' (6). The athletes link perceived problems of learning with ID, especially concerning normative ideas about how one is expected to learn. However, the way sports are constructed, cognitive differences and deviations from able-minded norms are a prerequisite for participation in disability sports. The athletes talked about an essential rule in disability sports: regardless of their abilities, no one should be denied participation. One interviewee stated:

Yes, people have different kinds of disabilities. Everyone should play and do something. Everyone is not as good, but good in their own way. ... everyone should play. There is a rule in disability sports that you cannot deny anyone the chance to play or train. Everyone has the right to play or train. (3)

Participation should be everyone's right, regardless of abilities. For the athletes, support—whether it come from the coaches or other athletes—is important for participation and support is provided by altering and adjusting sports activities according to the athletes' individual needs.

In summary, opportunities for participation are created through social interactions with others, and notions of able-mindedness lose power in the contextual social interactions between athletes and coaches within disability sports.

Discussion

The human body and mind are the foremost symbols representing who one *is* (Cooley 1902; Smith et al. 2013), and a fully functional body and mind are considered the norm in society (Campbell 2012; Taylor 2015). Participating in sports activities is important for the development of an athletic identity, which is contextually bound to disability sports. Practices of able-mindedness categorise athletes in different sports domains, and disability sports are embedded with normalising labelling.

The athletic identity within disability sports could be stigmatised, and yet the perceived stigma of having ID and being a labelled an 'intellectually disabled athlete' could also create a common identity and sense of belonging. However, this unified identity and position in disability sports is enacted via marginalisation from other sports domains.

Sports targeting people with ID are constructed to facilitate participation and community (SSC 2009), which the athletes confirmed. However, participation in disability sports is followed by deviant labelling and stigma. When one is labelled different or deviant, they are often directed towards a separate part of the sports context, where a sense of community and belonging are found with those exposed to the same deviant labelling and segregation. Disability

sports are thus organised for individuals deemed unfit to compete in other sports domains. To fight able-mindedness in the creation of a unified athletic identity, of increased participation and of community, the athletes must face the labels of being different and disabled. In relation to Wickman (2008), Smith et al. (2015) and Swartz et al. (2018), common identities and a sense of belonging reconstruct notions of able-mindedness and—through these—the meaning of participation, with unified identities facilitating social relationships and community.

Exclusion from certain sports domains was due to the athletes' perceived deviation from able-minded norms, where the athletes ascribe themselves ID as an imminent label and able-mindedness creates rules of conduct they must live up to for participation. (Dis)ability is constructed in an ableist fashion, placing disability in the margin of ability and disability sports in the margin of the sports context. Disability sports discourses denote everybody's right to participate, no matter what, and even though disability sports are based on notions of able-mindedness, able-mindedness has no place in disability sports.

The athletes mentioned that the coaches' focus was on sports activities and creating a good community among the athletes and the social interaction between athletes and coaches contributed to a unified athletic identity. Pack, Kelly and Arvinen-Barrow (2017) and Smith et al. (2015) discussed athletic identity as overriding disability, which was apparent to some extent in this study; however, the athletes, when talking about their sports activities, often emphasised their belonging in disability sports and that they had ID. They were disability sports athletes, not intellectually disabled athletes. Wendell (1989) and Taylor (2015) argue that exclusion and pejorative labelling can force individuals to internalise pervasive cultural preferences. If you are told often enough that you are different, you may start to believe it. At the same time, stigma can serve to unify and to 'help' athletes position themselves in disability sports; identifying as a 'disability sports athlete' rather than a 'disabled athlete' is both stigmatising and exalting (c.f. Apeldoorn 2014; Guerrero & Martin 2018).

Disability sports are constructed as a specific sports domain in the sports context, and to participate in disability sports, athletes must live up to normative societal constructions of disability. Normalising practices of able-mindedness could label the athletes as different and attribute ID as a stigma (Goffman 1963). At the same time, the construction of disability sports as a specific sports domain created an arena in which able-mindedness has less power. This decrease in power serves not only to subordinate and accept practices of oppressive and deviant labelling, but also to challenge boundaries of normative behaviour. That being said, labels of being different hinder participation in physical activities. However, the same labels can serve to manage or minimise marginalisation and exclusion, thus facilitating participation.

The sports context judges athletes according to able-minded norms and with respect to what they cannot do; it determines who has access to what and who categorises athletes according to their abilities (c.f. Apeldoorn 2012b). Able-mindedness in the sports context has similarities to Bentham's *panopticon* (c.f. Foucault 1995), that is, an institutionalised form of power that produces and maintains normalising practices of intellectual and cognitive norms. Athletes subjected to able-mindedness are categorised into specific sports domains (i.e., disability sports) and can be moved to the margins of the sports context. Thus, the sports context presents binary understandings of sports where the emergence of disability sports as a separate sports domain can undermine patterns of marginalisation and offer possibilities for participation.

Conceptualisations of ID clearly affect the conditions for participation in the disability sports context. Athletes are both subjected to and co-constructors of able-minded norms in sports (e.g. Apeldoorn 2014; Schalke 2016; Smith et al. 2015). When conditions for participation are based on able-mindedness, participation can become stigmatising.

Conclusions and Practical Implications

In this study's context, participation means to take part in sports activities, regardless of abilities or disabilities. Participation in disability sports influences one's personal identity and forms a common athletic identity that works to override deviant labelling from able-mindedness.

Disability sports can be inclusive and can facilitate participation; it is an arena in which social interaction and the construction of a unified athletic identity diminish able-mindedness and in which everybody can engage in sport activities regardless of disabilities and abilities. The aim of establishing disability sports was to increase everybody's opportunities to participate in sports activities. However, disability sports as a separate sports domain can create a stigma of being different and not able-minded enough to engage in sport activities, thus submitting to able-mindedness.

Taken together, this study has potential implications for the disability sports and other sports domains. A better understanding of athletes' experiences of participation is essential for coaches, physical educators, families, service providers and other athletes, especially in the facilitation of participation in disability sports. Increased knowledge about how able-mindedness affects athletic identity can improve how, in what ways and for whom sport activities are organised. For example, whether sport activities are developed with or without the voices of the athletes they concern.

In addition, discussions of how normalising practices and deviant labelling or othering affect participation and the identities of athletes in disability sports must be further elucidated to challenge stigmatisation and marginalisation in the sports context.

Further research

This study explored athletes' experiences of participation in disability sports. To create a deeper understanding of the meaning of participation, interviews with athletes in unified sports (sports teams targeting people with and without ID) could be conducted.

Limitations

In qualitative research, a potential limitation lies in the communication and interpretations between researchers and research participants. As a researcher in an interview situation it is impossible to know how questions are interpreted until an answer is given. This dilemma was addressed with extensive reading on interviewing, with getting acquainted with the athletes and with familiarisation with their context (Hollomotz 2018; Sigstad 2014).

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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