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# The unexpected developments in disability sports. What does it all mean?

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## Abstract

Since the 1990s, we have researched, together with a number of colleagues and students, the physical activity of persons with disabilities, focusing on different types of physical and sports practises and studying them at different levels, from the micro- to the macro-social level.

Drawing on an interactionist perspective, we initially explored how people with various impairments interacted with others within social spaces where physical and sports activities were being practised. We wanted to understand how face to face interactions could be transformed in the specific context of physical experiences with others. How did the setting in motion of the impaired body, which can lead to new ways of staging oneself, allow changes in social interactions at a micro-social level? Though the relationship between singular bodies, bodies in motion, social bonds and identities are central to our reflections, we very soon had to take into account the organizational and institutional frameworks for studying the physical activities we observed.

On the basis of practices initially mostly limited to rehabilitation prospects, or confined within peer groups inside the world of disability, a process of integration into sports associations or common sports areas was developed, which at the same time reinforced a trend of growing participation in sports. Specific sports organizations, local, national and international, have been set up at the interface between the world of disability and sports, promoting sports events that have turned into global sporting spectacles, the images of which have been more and more multiplied by the media.

This keynote speech aims to examine the meanings of the extraordinary developments, unexpected to some, that we can observe in the physical and sports practises of people with disabilities. Indeed, if history is the laboratory of the sociologist, as Norbert Elias said, we could venture that the history of sports and physical activities of people with a disability is an exceptional laboratory for the sociologist interested in researching otherness, diversity and the mechanisms that people can devise to learn how to live with others. From the shame of impairment to the pride of a relative body performance and its exhibition in sport also entails a deconstruction of the subordinate status of people with impairments.

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