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THE SOCIAL WORLD OF ABLE-BODIED AND DISABLED ATHLETES

ŚWIAT SPOŁECZNY SPORTOWCÓW PEŁNOSPRAWNYCH I Z NIEPEŁNOSPRAWNOŚCIĄ

ABSTRACT

AIM:

The goal is to present the results of sociological research with respect to comprehending the subjective social world of both able-bodied and disabled athletes.

METHODS:

The research used the concept of Fritz Schütze, with the biographical method and the narrative interview technique being employed. Intentional sampling was used. Fifty-six interviews were conducted, where the respondents were divided into eight categories based on: physical fitness, stage of sports career, and type of sports discipline.

RESULTS:

From the analyses performed, the motivation and importance of sport in the lives of both able-bodied and disabled athletes, their families and professional situation, the education process, as well as the completion of their sports career have been presented.

DISCUSSION:

Compared to their peers, able-bodied athletes were distinguished by their skills, which determined their decision to compete in sport. People with a disability could meet other disabled individuals during sports training. The choice of the sport discipline depended on predispositions. A club's policy and the rules governing it influenced the lives of the competitors: they discontinued education or delayed starting a family. In the social world of sport, competitors met significant others. Practising a discipline determined the time of retirement from sports.

KEYWORDS: *sociology, social word, disability, sport, sports career*

STRESZCZENIE

CEL:

Celem jest prezentacja wyników badań socjologicznych dotyczących poznania subiektywnego świata społecznego sportowców pełnosprawnych i z niepełnosprawnością.

METODY:

W badaniach wykorzystano koncepcję Fritza Schützego, Zastosowano metodę biograficzną, technikę wywiadu narracyjnego. Stosowano celowy dobór próby. Przeprowadzono 56 wywiadów, badanych podzielono na osiem kategorii w oparciu o: sprawność fizyczną, etap kariery i rodzaj uprawianej dyscypliny sportu.

WYNIKI:

W wyniku przeprowadzonych analiz przedstawiono motywację i znaczenie sportu w życiu zawodników pełnosprawnych i z niepełnosprawnością, ich sytuację rodzinną i zawodową, proces edukacji oraz zakończenie kariery sportowej.

OMÓWIENIE:

Sportowców pełnosprawnych na tle rówieśników wyróżniały umiejętności, co determinowało decyzję o uprawianiu sportu. Osoby z niepełnosprawnością podczas treningów mogły spotkać inne jednostki z niepełnosprawnością. Wybór dyscypliny sportu zależał od predyspozycji. Polityka klubu i zasady w nim obowiązujące wpływały na życie zawodników: rezygnowali z edukacji, zwlekali z założeniem rodziny. W świecie społecznym sportu zawodnicy spotykali znaczących innych. Uprawiana dyscyplina determinowała czas przechodzenia na emeryturę sportową.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: *socjologia, świat społeczny, niepełnosprawność, sport, kariera sportowa*

INTRODUCTION

A. Clarke (1991, p. 131) perceives the social world as: “groups with joint commitment to specific activities, sharing various types of resources to achieve their goals, and creating common ideologies about presiding over their own affairs.” Referring to the theory of H. Blumer (2007), A.L. Strauss (Kacperczyk, 2012, p. 276) as well as E. Husserl (Turner, 2008, p. 412), sport can be acknowledged as one of the worlds appearing in a complex and constantly changing society, the most important activity of which is to improve skills in a given sports discipline. The social world of athletes is distinguished from other worlds by the actions taken or by a specific language (Lipoński, 2004, p. 411), solidarity manifested by a moral and ideological community and values (Kowalczyk, 2012, p. 28), a lifestyle requiring a diet from its competitors, numerous training sessions, and travel. A sports career illustrates the specifics of this world; it begins in the period of an individual’s adolescence and ends when the competitor’s peers are in a period of career stability. A. Pawlak (1995, pp. 265-267) notes that a career begins early and lasts for a relatively short time and has a saltatorial nature, as a player can achieve success very quickly; while on the other hand, failure can lead to its degradation.

The research conducted so far has related to a fragment of the social world, e.g. research on: the changing nature of participation in recreational sports (Heinemann, 1998, pp. 27-38), fan culture (Kossakowski, Kurowski, Nowakowski, 2015), fan protests (Guschwann, 2016, pp. 388-402), carnality and the importance of gender in sport (Jakubowska, Byczkowska-Owczarek, 2018, pp. 12-28.), sports marketing (Schlossberg, 1992, pp. 112-122), deviations in the world of sport (Masters, 2015, pp. 111-123) as well as the relationships between sports success and culture (Kocemba, 1978, pp. 4-7). The research carried out among athletes pertained to: their sports career (Koz, Fraser-Thomas, Backer, 2012, pp. 64-69), other research included current and former players practising the same or different sports disciplines, (Szyngiera, 1996; Borg, Osborne, Tweedy, Liljedahl, Nooijen, 2022, pp. 384-388), as well as research conducted among players with disabilities (Niedbalski, 2020, pp. 180-197; Brown, Pappous, 2021, pp. 18-43; Haslett, Smith, 2021, pp. 65-76). Research on the social world of able-bodied (AA) and disabled (DA) athletes

are therefore in this innovative background. The aim of the article is to present the results of sociological research on the understanding of the subjective social world of able-bodied and disabled athletes.

RESEARCH METHOD

The subject of interest was the subjective image of the social reality of athletes practising competitive sports, and the aim was to learn about and build the subjective social world of athletes. During the research process a “principle of openness” was adopted, meaning an abandoning of hypotheses. Also adopted was a “principle of communication,” specifying established communication with the subject of the study in such a way, so as not to violate its own communication rules (Prawda, 1989, p. 88). Several research problems were formulated: what is the meaning of sport in the lives of athletes?; what drives individuals in their behavior?; whether sport influenced the education process of athletes?; how is the family and professional situation of athletes shaped?; and how is their sports career going?

The biographical method and the narrative interview technique were used during the research process. It was conducted according to the concept of F. Schütz (2012, pp. 141-278), which referred to the analysis of individual cases and demonstrated that the history of an individual’s life consists of a sequence of specific process structures, notably: institutional patterns, biographical plans of action, trajectories and transformations. These structures enable the reproduction and comparison of individual biographical fates.

The narrative interview was carried out in five phases, these were: the beginning, the stimulating narrative, the narrator’s story, posing questions to the narrator about issues raised in the narrative which were not fully explained, and the end of the interview (Konecki, 2000, pp. 181-183). The interviews were recorded on a dictaphone and then transcribed.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RESPONDENTS

A deliberate selection of the sample was made, reaching successive athletes enabled usage of the ethnographic “snowball” effect. The research was conducted in the Podkarpackie Voivodeship in 2018. The athletes were selected on the basis of three criteria: ability (A – able-bodied, D – disabled) type of sports discipline (I – individual, T – team), sports career at the moment (A – active, R – retired from sports). Sport categories were appointed: ATA, AIA, ATR, AIR, DTA, DIA, DTR, DIR. The analysis allowed for saturation in each of the eight groups after conducting seven narrative interviews; therefore, 56 interviews were taken into account.

For the purposes of the study, a competitive athlete was defined as an individual who, firstly, had regularly trained in sport for a period of at least four years. Secondly, the athlete had participated in competitions of at least a national level or had belonged to a club that had participated in the highest league games in the voivodeship. Thirdly, the respondent had aspired to compete and achieve the highest possible results. Competition was considered to be the element that distinguishes competitive athletes from individuals practising non-professional sports.

Twenty-eight Polish athletes participated in the research, of which twelve of the athletes had represented Poland during the Olympic Games (six Olympians and six Paralympians), and the other sixteen in other competitions at the international level. Among them there were eight AA and the same number of DA. The remaining 28 athletes (14 AA and 14 DA) had primarily participated in competitions on the national stage. The youngest respondent was 19 years of age, while the oldest was 88 years of age. Among the athletes, the individuals who had trained for the shortest period of time were those who had connected sport with their lives for at least four years. Five players had trained for the longest period, for at least 30 years

MOTIVATION, THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SPORT

The predisposition of AA to practise sport appeared in childhood (twenty-one respondents started training then). AA had made decisions about practising sport because their skills distinguished them from their peers. In turn, motivation from family was the incentive for fifteen AA to begin training at a later age. DA attended sports training motivated by the fact that they could meet other individuals with physical disabilities there. In the case of AA, a predisposition to sport was most often noticed by physical education teachers and trainers.

It was my uncle who, in fact, encouraged me to participate in this sport and above all supported me in this. He is a physical education teacher (...) (5) And that's how he encouraged me from an early age, we used to play football or jog together, just like that. (AIA 7, 23 years of age).

In contrast, training for DA was proposed by the club's owner (six respondents) or another athlete (five individuals). Rehabilitation was also further incentive for their training

Well, we are practically fighting for ourselves, for our health, for competition, whatever, everybody has some form of the sport bug inside them. (DTA 1, 54 years of age)

People who encouraged athletes to practise sport can be considered as significant others in the biography of the respondents.

The occurrence of institutional patterns was noticed in 14 athletes who in their family had an athlete and during the process of socialization were prepared for a sports career.

(...) it was always sport for my dad, sport, mom got into it too. (DTR 3, 31 years of age)

The choice of a sports discipline largely depended on the innate predispositions of the individual: height, speed, reflexes and strength. In the case of DA, it was the disability that was significant. Nine athletes had initially trained in other disciplines, and only over time did they find those in which they achieved the best results. In the case of AA, a change in the sports discipline was associated with the emergence of the trajectory of an illness. Among AA, on the other hand, a change in plan of actions arose from the desire to “try something all over again.” The moment the respondents began to train regularly, as well as the appearance of the will to compete, should be considered as the time of realisation of biographical patterns of activities that allowed them to achieve top-level results.

The time the athletes devoted to their training was directly related to their subsequent achievements. To this extent, differences between DA and AA were evident, as the former trained with much less frequency than the latter. It was not the result of physical fitness or the involvement of the athletes, but the result of a higher level of professionalisation of AA sport.

EDUCATION, WORK, FAMILY

Narrators who devoted more time to training, had less time for other activities. An exemplification may be a fragment of the narrative:

It's just, there's no time. Because it's hard to separate (.5) and it takes training and it's, (.5) and there's also the family home and life and work. I am unable to say, how to make it easier, sometimes the family gets angry, but so is the life of an athlete (NGA 1, 54 years of age).

Training was given preference over social life or education. Three athletes had discontinued their education during middle school. The most favourable position was for ten of the respondents who had attended sports schools; including four of them who had attended sports championship schools

I was going to these camps abroad and I made a bet that I would like to pass ((school-leaving exam)) because I wanted to further my education. I just studied on the plane, on the train, or when I was going somewhere. And I passed my school-leaving examination without any problems (AIA 1, 31 years of age).

Nineteen respondents had higher education, while the other six were currently enrolled in studies. Their attachment to sport had a direct impact on the fields of study they chose; most often choosing instruction at a physical education academy. Education is one of the basic institutional patterns. Athletes wishing to meet social expectations and thinking about their future professional career following the end of their sports career did not often interrupt their education, or returned to it over time. It was the dominant process structure in the narratives of the six respondents.

Another institutional model realised by the respondents was a professional career. The type of employment one has is the element that divides high-performance athletes into professional and non-professional competitors. Twenty-seven individuals were classified as professional athletes since they received remuneration in the form of payments from the club, sponsors, or sports scholarships. This funding constituted their main or only source of income. Nine retired athletes found themselves in a special situation, where during their career they were employed in workplaces, yet instead of showing up at the workplace, they were obliged to train and participate in competitions. In this regard, as well as receiving remuneration for their sports activities, they were also recognised as professional athletes. For AA, it was for this reason that they started their sports career at a very young age with the profession of athlete being their first employment relationship. The situation was different in the case of AA who performed various professional careers (Szluż, 2005, pp. 213-224), combining them with a sports career. Accordingly, the athletes remained in employment after finishing their careers. One of the athletes decided to become a trainer. The situation of AA is different, as after the end of their sports career, thirteen athletes remained in the world of sports and perform the work of trainers and physiotherapists. Another fourteen athletes are still active and intend to take up sport-related work in the future. Work

is an institutional pattern and a biographical plan of action (Schütze, 2012, pp. 141-278).

The highest level of commercialisation and professionalisation manifested itself among ATA. Athletes in this category as well as competitors who once practised team sports (ATR) distinguish themselves from the rest. Getting accepted into a given club that would then become their employer was the most important for them. In the case of DA as well as AA, practising individual disciplines and earning money, was dependent on having a sponsor. Only athletes who were employed in clubs or had sponsorship agreements could resign from other professional work in favour of training

In order to achieve the best results, the narrators sometimes put their success above their family. In the course of the analyses, a certain regularity was observed: athletes who had been successful at the international level were more likely to put off starting a family than athletes who had been less successful.

I'm 26 now, so (1) we'll see. For sure I would like to have a child, obviously, but I cannot afford it for now, (.5) yeah. (AIA 3, 27 years of age)

AA practising team sports, despite their playing in lower leagues, also often delayed starting a family. It is related to the amount of training and constant travel that makes it impossible to establish a closer relationship with a partner. The respondents (30 individuals) emphasised that family members are trying to abide by their plans. The support of the family is extremely important here; thanks to it, the athlete has a chance to develop their career. In the cases of five athletes, the family discouraged them from practising sport. The disparity between AA and DA was noticed. While in the case of the former, the family sometimes worried about the future of the respondent, and therefore initially did not support the athletes; in the case of the latter, the family encouraged the athletes to participate in training and competitions to a large extent. These differences result from the fact that sport also played a rehabilitation role for DA.

Another institutional pattern imposed on athletes was family care. After becoming pregnant, four athletes resigned from sport, while another also discontinued their training; however, unlike the others, she returned to the struggle after four years. In the interviews (four of which concerned DA), it

was noticed that institutional patterns resulting from having a family, as well as the performance of a family function, became the dominant procedural structure.

SPORTS CAREER

Athletes who coped with the institutional models set for them by society took up action plans directed towards achieving the best possible results. They decided to live a life filled with a diet and training. Twenty-nine respondents admitted in their narratives that they had suffered minor injuries, while another nineteen athletes had to struggle with injuries.

Well, there is a huge risk, there are many injuries, big injuries, small injuries, there are those that you can quickly recover from, but there are also those that can finish your love affair with the ball or other sports disciplines. (ATA 1, 41 years of age)

The Trajectory of an illness (Schütze, 2012, p. 170, 185) had a significant impact on the players' training action plan. Sport can play both a stabilising and destabilising role in the lives of athletes. In the case of DA, sport was most often associated with stabilisation, especially after suffering an accident. The trajectory of the illness was both sudden and fundamental. The athletes, after initially striving for a state of wavering balance by telling themselves that their disability was only temporary and upon realising that their life would never be the same, were undergoing a mental breakdown. Sports became a way to theoretically rework the situation they had found themselves in, to organise their lives with a trajectory. The stabilising function was also visible among AA, who trained their given discipline from childhood, knew the applicable rules of this world and felt good in it. Sport also has a destabilising function, since the athletes attended competitions, or changed their place of residence or club affiliation. These constant changes made it difficult to establish solid relationships with other individuals. Sport is characterised by unpredictability, as an athlete belonging to the forefront of world rankings, after one terrible

season, may lose sponsors and, in effect, income. This aspect of the destabilisation function was visible mainly in the case of the AA.

In the social world of athletes, apart from other competitors, there are significant others: coaches, managers, judges, and physiotherapists. The individual who had a significant impact on the life of the narrators was their trainer (47 respondents), whose skills determine whether the athlete will be successful. The DA was attached to the being of the trainer. In turn, the AA to a greater extent, allowed the possibility of change. Limited relationships between the trainer and the athlete were visible among the AA practising team sports. The professionalisation of these disciplines meant that the player was treated as an employee, and the trainer as their supervisor.

In their narratives, the athletes also referred to other individuals related to the world of sport: activists and club owners. DA mentioned these individuals as they were people who encouraged them to practise sport. When speaking of activists and managers, AA emphasised their role in the transfer of athletes, the functioning of the league, and the appointment of trainers. Sometimes they said, in turn, that these individuals care not so much about the athlete as for their own benefits. Only nine respondents referred in their narratives to sports psychologists who helped them manage stress. Other individuals include: sports medicine doctors, medical rehabilitation specialists, masseurs, and nutritionists. The fans were also an essential party in the world of sport, adding energy during a competition.

It's nice when there are fans, because they cheer (...) it is however, these fans that give a kind of colour to these matches, this whole thing, these entire surroundings (...) (ATA 6, 31 years of age)

However, the fans were not always favorable to the players, especially when they had experienced defeats.

The demands placed on athletes by clubs are increasing in the context of the professionalisation of a given discipline and the level of the competition. Club affiliation has often been required in the sports world. The athlete has the opportunity to participate in competitions when they belong to the club. Sports facilities and equipment are also inscribed in the social world of athletes.

In the narratives, thirteen respondents referred negatively to the place where they had to train (architectural barriers, inadequate equipment). Only four athletes spoke positively about the conditions they encountered.

Another specific element of the social world of sport is its rules and principles. These elements play an essential role in the process of legitimising the social world of athletes, as requirements that do not exist in any other social world were often imposed on players. Athletes were to follow the ethics of sport. This world, however, did not protect itself from specific deviations, for example, favoritism and doping.

I was offered doping substances. (...) For someone with a disability, they then incorporate steroids, so you can say, additionally it destroys your health. I didn't take them, I have trained clean all my life, and it will stay that way. (DIA 2, 33 years of age).

Deviations are not the only elements of this world that arouse feelings of injustice among athletes. Eight individuals were dissatisfied with the rules in effect in this world, among others, two athletes in senior groups that were less likely to receive sports scholarships than those in the junior groups. In contrast, seven players raised the issue relating to the injustice connected with the better financing of more popular sports disciplines.

The world of sport is distinguished from other worlds by the course of a sports career. Athletes of various ages retired from sport, which was mainly determined by the discipline practised. Athletes lifting weights or training table tennis could take part in competitions much longer than short-distance runners, who along with their age lost speed, gaining in endurance. Athletes training from childhood, most often finished their careers at the age of 30-35. On the other hand, athletes who started their careers later (mainly DA) indicated the age of 50-55 when they finished their struggle. The most frequently mentioned reasons for ending a career include the fact that the athlete had achieved what they had intended, or that there were younger players who could not be equaled.

After the Paralympics, I decided that I already have everything, I've already achieved, so much training and it's time I expanded my family. (DIR 6, 45 years of age)

Only three athletes said that a competitor's career ends when they place their family ahead of sport. The athletes, unable to accept walking away from sport, decided to find employment within it: ten became trainers, two were employed in club administration, two operated a sport-related business, and the last athlete became a sports activist. In the case of active athletes, there was a visible desire to remain in this world after their careers had ended (14 respondents), as ten of them mentioned that they intend to become trainers, two plan to take up rehabilitation, another wants to be a nutritionist, and another intends to work in a fitness club.

I finished my career as an active athlete and started to amuse myself with coaching, i.e. training athletes to play basketball. (ATR 4, 56 years of age, s. 1-2)

Active AA practising a team sports discipline are most vulnerable to the build-up of trajectory potential related to a lack of skills allowing them to find employment outside sport in the future. This is undoubtedly due to the high commercialisation of team sports, as a result of which players who want to achieve success have to sacrifice other activities. Out of seven respondents, three are most vulnerable to the trajectory related to difficulty in finding work after finishing their career (threat of unemployment), since they discontinued their education early. As far as one athlete is concerned, they have in no way contemplated their future after the end of their career, while the other two discussed plans for their future (one wishes to become a trainer, the other is thinking about starting "their own business"). Two, however, have not made any effort to implement these plans, so they can be treated more in the context of aspirations. Another four players from this group made efforts and continued their education to facilitate their plans.

The time to end a sports career is not easy for athletes. On occasion, the respondents, unable to reconcile with this, sought a state of labile equilibrium and trained in lower leagues, or participated in less prestigious competitions.

With time, however, they reached the theoretical reworking of their position and the regaining of control over the resulting trajectory. Athletes are primarily industrious and ambitious people, accustomed to work and many sacrifices; thanks to which, after the first shock associated with leaving sport, they relatively quickly found themselves in a reality new to them. They emphasised the importance of sport in their lives. In nineteen biographies there was a process structure described as transformation. Amongst sixteen DA who lost their ability as a result of an accident, the transformation resulted from the necessity to undertake new action plans, including activities related to sports activity. In turn, the able-bodied competitor stated that thanks to her sports activity she became a person open to others. The last two biographies where a transformation was observed also belonged to DA, whose marriages fell apart. The subjects ended their “toxic relationships” and realised their adopted plan. For active athletes, the ending of a sports career is a future that they ponder most often and try to plan for, yet it is difficult for them to come to terms with the loss. Former competitors recall memories; they keep numerous trophies, diplomas and newspaper articles. They mentioned that if they had the opportunity, they would return to the world of sport as athletes.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, AA made decisions to practise sport (J.L. Duda (1995, pp. 57–91) drew attention – in the context of social theories of cognitive achievement motivations – to the perspective of the goal), since their skills set them apart from their peers. DA could meet with other individuals with disabilities while at sports training. The choice of a sport discipline depends on the individual’s predispositions: growth, speed, reflexes and strength. The disability was equally important. The club’s policies and rules had an impact on the athletes’ personal lives. Occasionally, it was the requirements of the clubs that caused the players to withdraw from education or, in the case of athletes, to delay starting a family. In the social world of sport, athletes met significant others. The club’s requirements for athletes grew in the context of the professionalisation of a given discipline and the rank of the competition.

Ending a sports career – which was confirmed through research (Fernandez, Stephan, Fouquereau, 2006, pp. 407-421) – was difficult for the athletes. The time of retirement in sport – in accordance with research results (McKnight, Bernes, Gunn, Chorney, Orr, Bardick, 2009, pp. 63-77) – was determined by the discipline practised.

In summation, athletes improve their physical fitness, establish relationships with other people, and receive funding and rewards. Individuals who decide to practise sports professionally experience: difficult beginnings and many sacrifices, problems related to reconciling training with family life, education or professional activity, as well as training in ill-suited spaces using second-hand equipment, a lack of financial resources, and injuries. The results of the qualitative research conducted may become the impetus to conduct – with an emphasis on the gender of the competitors – further research on the social world of athletes.

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