Disability Sport Socialization and Identity Construction

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The subject of this paper is the sport socialization of athletes with disabilities; the object is to contribute to research and praxis through a review of the relevant sociological literature on the subject. The majority of the research, which uses structural-functionalism, is seen as a set of pioneering attempts to generate reliable information. However, the resulting information is too simplistic and theoretically deficient. The minority of the research, which uses interactionism, is seen as complementing the structural-functionalist studies by focusing on different aspects of the socialization experiences of athletes with disabilities. This research is insightful but it is collectively unsystematic. It is concluded that the study of disability sport socialization is in its infancy and is in urgent need of an adequate theoretical foundation. Three theoretical suggestions are offered to provide such a foundation, together with substantive suggestions for focusing on the themes of institutionalized physical activity and sport, social relationships, social configurations, and social control.

The subject of this paper is the sport socialization of athletes with disabilities; the object is to contribute to research and praxis through a review of the relevant sociological literature on the subject. This was prompted by an apparent lack of sociological analysis in Lindstrom’s (1992) contribution to a debate between Brasile (1990, 1992) and Thiboutot, Smith, and Labanowich (1992) on the inclusion of nondisabled athletes and athletes with minimal disabilities in disability sport. Lindstrom (1992) argued against inclusion on the grounds that the resultant competition would not and does not preserve the identities of athletes with disabilities. These identities, he maintained, are sufficiently different from the identities of nondisabled athletes and athletes with minimal disabilities to warrant separate competition. However, the evidence from research on the sport socialization of athletes with disabilities undermines his position and needs to be considered in the debate. Socialization is an important sociological concept in any consideration of disability sport. It is . . .

the process by which we acquire the culture of the society into which we are born—the process by which we acquire our social characteristics and learn the ways of thought and behaviour considered appropriate in our society... When individuals, through socialisation, accept the rules and expectations of their society that make up its culture and use them to determine how they should act, we say they have internalised society's cultural rules. (Bilton et al., 1987, p. 12)

Disability sport socialization is concerned with the latter part of this definition and how individuals with disabilities acquire their sporting identities. At its most simple, it focuses our sociological attention upon sport and the development of individuals with impairments as participants in specific sport groups and, at the same time, upon the more general development of individuals with impairments as social beings.

The enduring central theme in the sociological study of the social development of individuals with impairments has been the notion of impairment as a difference and the meanings that are placed upon that difference as part of a more general research agenda on the relationship between the individual and society (cf. Brittan, 1980). There are two aspects of this relationship that are pertinent. On the one hand individuals are constrained by a nondisabled social world that circumscribes the identities of people with impairments and labels them disabled. In this sense the individual is a passive recipient in the transmission of taken-for-granted meanings about disability. On the other hand individuals with impairments are active in the management of their own biographies, and in particular contexts they actively construct their own meanings and their sense of self as a person with a disability in specific ways.

The importance of the sport context to this social process has been recognized over the past 10 years by researchers who have examined the socialization of individuals from various impairment groups into sport roles. These have included athletes with spinal cord injuries and other athletes who use wheelchairs (Axe, 1992; Dickinson & Perkins, 1985; Hopper, 1982; Kennedy, 1980; Williams, 1992; Zoerink, 1992) as well as athletes with cerebral palsy (Sherrill & Rainbolt, 1986; Sherrill, Rainbolt, Montelione, & Pope, 1986; Whidden, 1986), visual impairments (Dickinson & Perkins, 1985; Nixon, 1989; Sherrill, Pope, & Arnhold, 1986; Sherrill, Rainbolt, Montelione, & Pope, 1986), and hearing impairments (Stewart, McCarthy, & Robinson, 1988; Stewart, Robinson, & McCarthy, 1991) and others (Johansson, Thorstenson, & DePauw, 1991; Wang, 1990).

All of these researchers, in one way or another, have examined some aspect of the relationship between the individual with an impairment and society in the context of sport. In the main, however, they have limited their attention to the particular features that result from the presence of impairments and are additive to sport socialization in general. In doing so, they have followed the sociological literature and utilized two main approaches. Some, the majority, have used a structural-functionalist approach, while others, the minority, have used a symbolic interactionist approach. As we shall see, these two approaches complement each other; both are important because, together, they provide a more complete picture of disability sport socialization than each can offer in isolation.
Structural-Functionalist Approaches to Disability Sport Socialization

Structural-functionalism was the first sociological perspective to be used, albeit implicitly in many cases, to study disability sport socialization. It is a perspective that has much in common with, for example, the functionalism that underlies the psychologistic meanings of impairment, disability, and handicap that have currency at the moment (cf. Hutzler, 1990; Vermeer, 1991; WHO, 1980), and it has appealed to the majority of researchers in this area. Its importance, and the importance of the early studies on disability sport socialization, lies in the fact that it appears to have fueled pioneering attempts to bring a distinctly sociological approach to the study of sport and disability. A major tenet of a sociological approach that is particularly useful, and intuitively appealing in any consideration of disability, is that identities are socially constructed. In other words there is nothing inherent in the identity of an athlete with a disability that is not the product of social interaction and of socialization.

In the structural-functionalist perspective, socialization is a particularly important process for the maintenance of the social system. In this case, for any social system to sustain itself each new generation must learn the cultural rules of the group that are relevant to disability. Each generation must conform to some degree and accept the legitimacy of various institutions (political, social, economic, cultural) within the system and how they define and shape the identities of athletes with disabilities qua individuals with disabilities and qua athletes with disabilities. With this approach, then, the identity of an athlete with a disability is a sport role that has to be learned using cultural material available in the social system. The problem facing the researcher, however, is that each socializee’s experiences are quite unique because of differences in the social resources to which they have access, the social milieu in which they are located and their structural position in the system, the specific socializing factors that influence them, and so on. The solution is to find commonalities of experience within the complex of socializing factors and it is here that theory has made a vital contribution.

The theoretical origins of disability sport socialization research lie in the sociology of sport. In particular the work of Kenyon and McPherson (1981) is cited heavily in the literature on the strength, perhaps, of its advocacy of both psychological and sociological variables and of its use of the structural-functionalist approach. They have argued for a social role–social system approach to socialization and have introduced a social learning model that has three main elements—significant others, socialization situations, and personal attributes—as an example of variations in the approach to the study of socialization. They outlined several propositions in a theoretical discussion that covered the following themes: (a) sport roles—the dependent variable problem, (b) social systems and socialization—the general case, (c) relevant factors in relevant social systems, (d) explaining sport socialization at the system level, and (e) national differences in the socialization process. This was followed by a consideration of research findings that focused on socialization into roles associated with primary and secondary sport involvement.

This social role–social system approach has been adopted in the majority of studies on disability sport socialization although the propositions generated
by Kenyon and McPherson (1981) have not been subjected to analysis in the disability sport context. Rather, early studies such as those of Kennedy (1980), Hopper (1982), Dickinson and Perkins (1985), Sherrill, Pope, and Arnhold (1986), Sherrill and Rainbolt (1986), Whidden (1986), and Sherrill, Rainbolt, Montelione, and Pope (1986) utilized the social learning aspects of socialization transposed into a very simple conceptual framework. It comprises

significant others (socializing agents) who exert influence within social situations (socializing agencies) upon role learners (actors or role aspirants) who are characterized by a wide variety of relevant personal attributes.

Later studies such as those of Stewart et al. (1988, 1991), Wang (1990), Johansson et al. (1991), and Zoerink (1992) adopted this framework when these researchers utilized the earlier literature and attempted to progress it. The collective program of all this work has focused primarily on whether, and how, the particular elements of the conceptual framework—socializing agents, socializing situations, and personal attributes—are empirically different from those of nondisability sport socialization. The general consensus is that disability sport socialization is different from nondisability sport socialization and that it differs by groups with similar functional impairments. Four of these groups have been examined specifically with this simple conceptual framework: athletes with spinal cord injuries, spina bifida, or amputations; those with cerebral palsy; those with hearing impairments; and those with visual impairments.

**Significant Others**

The sport socialization of athletes with disabilities occurs through the social relationships they establish and maintain with others. Determining who these “others” are and distinguishing between those who are “significant” and those who are not has claimed the attention of the majority of researchers. This attention has been focused, in the main, on the significant others who have generated an initial interest in sport participation and, to a lesser extent, on significant others who were the most influential in learning a sport role.

Kennedy (1980), Hopper (1982), Dickinson and Perkins (1985), and Zoerink (1992) have examined the sport socialization of athletes with spinal cord injury, spina bifida, and amputations who participate using wheelchairs. Their results are fairly consistent and show that peers and friends are the most important initial socializing agents into wheelchair sports, followed by agents in community settings (agencies, recreation centers, and other nonschool settings); schools and the family are considered the least important. Zoerink (1992), though, did note a difference between individuals with congenital and acquired impairments in that those with congenital impairments were more influenced by physical therapists and family members than they were by other athletes with disabilities. However, this group is so heterogeneous that it is difficult to make explanatory generalizations from these studies.

Sherrill, Rainbolt, Montelione, and Pope (1986), Whidden (1986), and Sherrill and Rainbolt (1986) studied athletes with cerebral palsy. Their results are consistent in that they all found that agents in school settings had very little influence on initial sport participation, but there is some variability with respect
to the importance of the other agents. Whidden (1986), for example, found the family to be the most important, while Sherrill and Rainbolt (1986) found peers, friends, and spouses to be the most important. Sherrill, Rainbolt, Montelione, and Pope (1986), however, found a difference between individuals who were ambulant and those who used wheelchairs. For ambulant individuals, family members were the most important agents, but for those who used wheelchairs it was peers/friends who were the most important.

A similar variability can be found in the studies focusing on blind athletes by Sherrill, Pope, and Arnhold (1986), Sherrill, Rainbolt, Montelione, and Pope (1986), and Dickinson and Perkins (1985). All three studies found families to be the least important, with Sherrill, Pope, and Arnhold (1986) and Sherrill, Rainbolt, Montelione, and Pope (1986) ranking teachers with peers as the most important agents and Dickinson and Perkins (1985) ranking teachers third after community agents (e.g., agencies concerned with disability, role models).

Deaf athletes were a fourth group studied and, again, the findings are variable. Stewart et al. (1988) gave primacy to schools and deaf acquaintances in a study of deaf sport directors and then gave greater importance to hearing coaches in a later study of athletes (Stewart et al., 1991), although deaf friends and teachers were found to be influential. Interestingly, these two studies are the only ones in this literature to distinguish between the influences of those socializing agents who are nondisabled (hearing) and those who are disabled (deaf) although Stewart et al. (1988) did point out that deaf athletes are not disabled.

The general trend, then, is that disability sport socialization and nondisability sport socialization differ most markedly in the contributions of the family and the school to the process (cf. Lewko & Greendorfer, 1982); both make less contribution to disability sport socialization. This is further supported by two studies that did not study an impairment group but rather elite athletes who participate in wheelchair sports. Hedrick, Morse, and Figoni (1988) examined the training practices of wheelchair racers and sources from which they obtained relevant information; the authors found "other athletes" and "magazines" to be the primary sources. Parents and teachers made no contribution, and this was corroborated in a replication of Hedrick et al.'s (1988) study undertaken by Watanabe, Cooper, Vosse, Baldini, and Robertson (1992). In the latter study—which included wheelchair athletes, Special Olympics athletes, and athletes with visual impairments—the primary socialization agents were coaches, other athletes, and sports scientists but the authors did not distinguish the sources by impairment subgroup. However, given the age (late teens, early twenties) at which many wheelchair athletes start to participate in sport it is not surprising that neither parents nor teachers have an influence. It is surprising, though, that this should be true for athletes with congenital impairments.

Socializing Situations

In some of these studies the socializing situations were not differentiated but inferences could be made, perhaps, from the data on socializing agents. For example, it could be inferred that the sport socialization of athletes with spinal cord injuries does not occur in school settings. In other studies, however, notably those involving Claudine Sherrill (Sherrill, Pope, & Arnhold, 1986; Sherrill & Rainbolt, 1986; Sherrill, Rainbolt, Montelione, & Pope, 1986), this variable is incorporated explicitly in the research design. For athletes with cerebral palsy
the socializing situations included mainly competitive opportunities provided by
the United Cerebral Palsy Association for the socializing influences of peers,
friends, and spouses (Sherrill & Rainbolt, 1986) as well as nonschool disability
sport clubs, home and neighborhood, and segregated and integrated classes in
schools (Sherrill, Rainbolt, Montelione, & Pope, 1986). For athletes with visual
impairments the socializing situations include mainly residential schools, home
and neighborhood, and mainstream physical education (Sherrill, Rainbolt, Mon-
telione, & Pope, 1986) as well as the competitive events organized by the U.S.
Association for Blind Athletes (Sherrill, Pope, & Arnohl, 1986). In addition,
the work of Stewart and his colleagues (1988, 1991) suggests that deaf athletes
are socialized mainly in deaf settings (deaf schools and deaf sporting events)
even though mainstreaming is occurring.

Personal Attributes

In most studies personal attributes are demographic variables that tend to be used
only as sample descriptors; only in a relatively few studies are they used as
independent variables. When they are used as independent variables they are
directly relevant to impairments as differences and include, therefore, the onset
of disability, severity of disability (usually operationalized as sport classification),
and gender. Severity of disability is usually found to be associated significantly
with placement in a residential institution or other segregated environment as in
the case of blind athletes and athletes with cerebral palsy (Sherrill, Rainbolt,
Montelione, & Pope, 1986). The other two variables, however, are more complex
in their apparent effects.

The onset of disability complicates the picture of initial sport socialization.
Where an impairment is congenital, individuals will have been subjected to the
long-term general and, sometimes, sport-specific socialization influences found
in settings such as special schools and disability sport competitions for children
organized by disability agencies. The disability socialization process, then, is
conceptualized as a more or less continuous experience for individuals with
congenital impairments. Individuals with acquired impairments, however, will
have been subjected to different socialization influences for varying lengths of
time depending on the age of acquiring the impairment. In the case of individuals
with spinal cord injuries, for example, many have been subjected to nondisabled
socialization prior to their injuries and subsequent disability sport socialization.
Disability socialization, then, is conceptualized as biographical discontinuity for
individuals with noncongenital impairments. The study by Zoerink (1992) is the
only one, however, that focuses specifically on the differential socialization of
these two groups. Despite this limited attention, though, the adult socialization
patterns reported among individuals with spinal cord injuries or amputations by
Kennedy (1980), Hopper (1982), and Hedrick et al. (1988) are manifestly different
from the childhood and adolescent patterns of those with cerebral palsy reported
by Sherrill, Rainbolt, Montelione, and Pope (1986) or those with hearing impair-
ments reported by Stewart et al. (1988, 1991).

All studies have included sex as a demographic variable. Most researchers
have included the variable expecting to find gender differences similar to those
found among sports men and women who are not disabled, but in the main the
results have shown no significant differences (e.g., Sherrill & Rainbolt, 1986;
Sherrill, Rainbolt, Montelione, & Pope, 1986; Zoerink, 1992). In only a few
studies were there some differences. Sherrill, Pope, and Arnhold (1986) found that their female respondents tended to be younger than 20 years, had congenital blindness, and were educated in residential schools; their male respondents tended to have acquired visual impairments and were educated at public schools. Dickinson and Perkins (1985) noted that female blind and wheelchair athletes were more influenced by their mothers than were males, who were more influenced by other athletes. In many studies females were underrepresented (e.g., Hedrick et al., 1988; Hopper, 1982) but this may have been for epidemiological reasons rather than because of differential socialization. However, only in Dickinson and Perkins’s (1985) study do we find any explanation that attempts to relate the differences to gender socialization.

The appeal of the simple conceptualization of sport socialization that underpins these structural-functionalist studies is very strong, and it has revealed some interesting differences between impairment groups. However, there are specific problems with the conceptualization, although they stem more from the interpretation and operationalization of the social role-social system approach than from the structural-functionalist theory itself.

The first problem is that many studies utilize a unidirectional view of the socialization process in which the individual must fit the social system (cf. McPherson, 1986). With this view individuals with disabilities are portrayed as helpless; they are at the mercy of socialization agents and accept unquestioningly what these agents have to offer. What they offer are cultural definitions of disability that contribute to a benign and harmonious social system. That is, perhaps, an inevitable consequence of the dominant medical discourse in the area of adapted physical activity (cf. Fulcher, 1989) in which the individual with a disability is seen as malleable, powerless, and passive. It is difficult with such a simplistic conceptual framework, therefore, to accommodate the notion of agency, and this is particularly noticeable in those studies (e.g., Sherrill, Pope, & Arnhold, 1986; Wang, 1990; Zoerink, 1992) which report that some individuals chose “self” as the primary socializing agent. The confusion this creates in the literature (e.g., over how the individual can be both the socializee and the socializer at the same time) is resolved by mentioning the result in passing but not offering any discussion. This superficial treatment highlights a disregard for the individual as a creator of culture and an active participant in the socialization process. Moreover, the brief consideration of “personal attributes” as demographic variables reflects only a partial understanding of the pragmatic nature of cultural production and the onus on “self” and biography to mediate between the different sources of information available.

A second problem is that some of the research tends to be misconceived. There is a collection of nonreflexive and abstracted data that indicate a lack of recognition of the complexity of the phenomena under scrutiny. For example, Whidden (1986) did not consider that gender or age could affect the sport socialization of individuals with cerebral palsy. In the case of individuals with traumatic paraplegia and quadriplegia (cf. Dickinson & Perkins, 1985; Hopper, 1982; Kennedy, 1980; Zoerink, 1992), there is frequently a misplaced assumption that a personal attribute such as previous sport experience actually plays a major part in posttrauma sport socialization when in fact the differences between the two experiences are so great that it is difficult to make connections (cf. Albrecht, 1976).
Moreover, it is theoretically misleading, in these studies of individuals with orthopedic impairments, to use a conceptual framework in which it is assumed that the school or nondisabled peers or community organizations influence socialization, for example, into wheelchair sports. Aside from the overwhelming evidence of a pattern of adult socialization among this group of individuals, for the most part teachers, nondisabled peers, and community coaches know very little about wheelchair sports, and more often than not wheelchair athletes are not welcomed in mainstream community sports clubs. In short, there appears to be a large gap between the researchers’ scheme of analysis as an interpretation of Kenyon and McPherson’s (1981) work and the complex experiences of athletes.

A third problem is a distortion of the relationships between the socializing agents themselves and between them and the socializee. In most studies elite athletes have been asked about their initial involvement in sport and about who influenced them. Sport socialization is operationalized as “who stimulated/encouraged/influenced you to take up this sport” (cf. Ruckert, 1980; Sherrill & Rainbolt, 1986). When socialization is reduced to a relatively brief event in this way, attention is focused on the presence or absence of the influence of significant others and one forced-choice answer is used to identify the primary agent of socialization from among them. Other agents are ignored or their contributions are minimized, subject to the vagaries of memory, as respondents interpret the term influenced as they feel appropriate.

Research designs do not, on the whole, discriminate between the different contributions made by different socialization agents. An athlete may have participated in a sport most frequently at school, for example, but the most useful information may have been contributed by a community coach. Or, a parent may have given financial support for frequent training sessions, but the athlete’s motivation may have been due to another athlete acting as a role model. Questionnaire designs in current use would not pick up their differential contributions; the study by Sherrill, Rainbolt, Montelione, and Pope (1986), which distinguished between the “person who most influenced the athlete” and “person who first taught the athlete,” is an exception to this criticism but even in this case only one agent is chosen. What appears to be lacking, also, is the idea that agents of socialization may or may not work in harmony. They may share the same goals or broad objectives, for example, but specific agreement about the means to achieve them may be absent.

A fourth problem is that “impairments” can be extremely limited and misleading analytical categories. Their use assumes that individuals in the same impairment category will be socialized in the same way, but this conflates socialization into disability sport per se and socialization into a disability sport. It assumes that individuals in the same impairment category have access to the same resources, same information, same socializing agents, and so on. It does not recognize, however, the various other groupings that occur within disability sport. Individuals with different impairments, for example, may participate in one sport (e.g., wheelchair racing) that has a social structure which helps to socialize new individuals in different ways to another sport with a completely different social structure (e.g., wheelchair basketball). Sport groupings, moreover, offer two advantages over current impairment groupings. As Hedrick et al. (1988) have shown in their study of wheelchair racers, concentrating on the sport allows the researcher, on the one hand, to focus on the more relevant socialization
elements (such as the sources of particular cultural material) that are peculiar to a specific context, and on the other hand to de-emphasize impairments. Except for this one study, rarely are individuals located in the broader social milieu and the consequent differences explained.

What tends to be missing from the analysis, then, is the idea of social context and an attendant cultural relativity, although it must be said that this is changing with two of the more recent studies. Wang’s (1990) study of the early sport socialization of elite athletes with disabilities in China showed quite clearly that physical education teachers were important for individuals living in rural areas while the onus was on self-motivation for those living in urban areas; the whole process was complicated by contextual factors such as the state control of television, the number of television sets available in the general population, limited salaries and a consequent lack of nutritious food, and a lack of suitable sports facilities. Johansson et al.’s (1991) study of athletes with disabilities in Sweden, however, indicated that friends and other athletes were the dominant socialization agents and that this was true whatever the impairment. Sweden, they note, has a less pronounced classification system and has one governing body working for the integration of athletes with disabilities.

These problems, then, point to a much more complex and more sophisticated social role–social system approach than the simple tripartite conceptualization of the social learning approach used in the literature. There are very few definite patterns to be found within the research that uses this approach. Only in a few cases are the results cumulative. There are two points to make, however, even in the face of such variations. Disability sport socialization is substantively different from nondisability sport socialization and evidently so, and there are also substantive differences between individuals even when they are grouped according to similarities in functional ability.

In addition, these studies have made three important contributions to the sociological research program in adapted physical activity. First, they have established disability sport socialization as a major sociological theme. Second, they have produced some exact and reliable information on aspects of disability sport socialization that has evident practical benefits in targeting resources to increase participation among a segment of the population whose rates of activity are extremely low compared to other groups, Third, their results should correct any assumptions we may have about the homogeneity of the population with impairments and the way sport opportunities are provided. They should counter the misplaced generalizations that are frequently made about athletes with disabilities.

**Interactionist Approaches to Disability Sport Socialization**

Studies that do not use structural-functionalism to examine disability sport socialization are relatively few but they have a common approach that comes under the broad term *interactionism*. This is an alternative view of socialization that puts great emphasis on biography and the acquisition of selfhood. *Biography*, here, refers to an individual’s history, and the sociological task is to examine how the self is constituted, confirmed, and transformed as the individual “interacts” with others (who also have biographies). Each individual’s biography and experience, of course, are unique but the interactionist approach resolves the
problems this creates for the researcher by positing symbols, meanings, and definitions of the situation that are held in common by members of the interacting group.

Interactionism offers a conceptualization of disability sport socialization that is different from that of structural-functionalism in a number of ways. First, individuals are active creators of their notion of self as persons with disabilities and as athletes with disabilities. They are situated in social contexts of sport that place limits on their freedom of action but which, nevertheless, provide enough scope for individual interpretation. Second, cultural relativity is recognized in the importance of social interaction and the "situatedness" of disability sport identities. Third, interactionism captures the processual nature of socialization as a dynamic and continuing feature of social involvement in sport. Fourth, it introduces the notion of disability career, a feature that is quite common in the mainstream sociological literature focusing on disability (cf. Oliver, Zarb, Silver, Moore, & Salisbury, 1988), that assumes some variability in the influences of different socialization factors for its duration. Fifth, interactionists use a variety of methodologies that capture the notions of social process, career, and interaction; they include interviews, participant observation, and document and discourse analysis. Importantly, the research is guided explicitly by theory so that the data are situated in the direct experience of the sporting lives of people with disabilities. The identity of an athlete with a disability, then, is seen as a complex phenomenon that is built up over the life of the career, and the career, its influences, and the content of the identity will fluctuate widely over that time.

The research that has used this approach complements the efforts of the structural-functionalists by focusing on the enactment of sport roles after initial involvement. It sheds a different light on the problem of disability sport socialization because the researchers have attempted to come to grips with the direct experience of individuals with disabilities. Studies have included those of Zoerink (1987), Nixon (1988, 1989), Newman (1990), Axe (1992), and Williams (1992). However, this research is not as systematic in the collective examination of the phenomena as those studies that use the structural-functionalist approach, and there appear to be no distinct patterns in this literature. Each researcher has examined different aspects of the socialization process.

Zoerink (1987) has examined the early play and recreation experiences of adult males in the United States with congenital and acquired orthopedic disabilities, looking in particular at social interaction with friends and parents. Using interview techniques he found that males with congenital impairments had more or about the same number of childhood opportunities to play with friends, be involved in active games, and play at friends' homes. He noted that recreation preferences change over time and this is important because it highlights an idea that should be obvious once it is pointed out: The social context in which we live is changing all the time, and if it does have an effect on sport involvement, then as the context changes in quantity or quality so we would expect changes in its influence on socialization.

Nixon (1989) explored the problematic aspects of integration in mainstream sport settings in his study of a boy who was visually impaired. Taking on the role of unobtrusive observer, Nixon examined the notion of "passing" and the interaction strains that occur in the context of sports performance. The study is particularly insightful in capturing the boy's attempts to assume a nondisabled
sport role, with its dependence on the use of appropriate performance and interaction skills, as well as the complexity of the athlete’s identity and its contextual influences.

A second study undertaken by Nixon (1988) examined the role of parents in the initial sport participation of children who are visually impaired. While previous studies had seen parents as implicitly positive socialization agents, of varying ranked importance depending on the disability group and how it was organized, Nixon (1988) introduced the idea that their influence could be negative. Following open-ended in-depth interviews, he constructed a typology of parental encouragement and discouragement that attempted to explain low sport participation rates. The types were strong encouragers, weak encouragers, tolerators, and discouragers, with the majority of parents falling into the latter three categories. Clearly this adds to our understanding of how sport socialization agents like parents operate in their relationships with individuals with disabilities and raises questions about the relationships between these socialization agents. They may or may not be mutually supportive in their contributions to the disability sport socialization of the individual.

Newman (1990), in a study of countryside recreation in the United Kingdom, used extensive interviewing to construct the activity histories of individuals with physical and sensory disabilities in order to make sense of the myriad factors that affect their participation. Personal circumstances change, sometimes as a result of changes in the social milieu and sometimes not. Newman’s (1990) contribution to the study of socialization is that he recognized the choices available to individuals with disabilities throughout their lives and he shed considerable light on disability socialization as a continual process. Moreover, because he plotted the life events and activity careers of 100 respondents in considerable detail, his findings acknowledge the individual as an active participant in the socialization process.

Axe (1992) studied the process of sport socialization in the rehabilitation of individuals with spinal cord injury. Using Denzin’s (1989) method of interpretive interactionism coupled with participant observation, she examined the role of the physiotherapist and the use of lay, medical, patient, and sport discourses in the early stages of identity construction following traumatic injury. She explored some of the contradictory themes—such as performance, science, and independence—which demand some reconciliation on the part of patients if they are to continue to participate in sport following their release from a spinal injury unit.

Williams (1992) examined the subculture of wheelchair racers, focusing particularly on disability sport socialization as culture transmission. Using participant observation, interviews, and document analysis (cf. Glaser & Strauss, 1967), he noted that the identities of wheelchair racers use subculture elements that derive from the general sport subculture; from specific sport subcultures such as athletics, cycling, and bodybuilding; from the spinal injuries subculture; and from the medical subculture. In addition, several socializing agents and agencies have a hand in shaping the subcultural material to form the racers’ identities. They include other wheelchair racers, wheelchair manufacturers, nondisabled sports men and women, the mass media and particularly newspapers and television, paramedical personnel (physiotherapists, occupational therapists, etc.), sports coaches, and sport scientists and researchers. Each of these appears to contribute different material to the subculture. For example, other wheelchair racers pass
on information about pushing techniques, coaches communicate values associated with training and winning, and paramedics offer information on the treatment of sports injuries. The beliefs, values, rules, norms, and so forth that make up the wheelchair racer's identity are produced by all of these agents and agencies in concert, and are interpreted by the racers to shape their definitions of the situation.

In spite of the disparate nature of these studies, they highlight the way an interactionist approach elaborates on the idea that the sport identity of an individual with a disability is the product of a particular configuration of influences. In this way they support the more macro level studies that use the structural-functionalist approach. Different configurations will produce different identities although they may share some common elements. For example, training information and principles may be quite universal and a part of the athlete's identity whether disabled or not. The specific cultural form that training takes, however, will vary; each is a product of the specific social configuration in which it is located, and only through separate study of each configuration can the different identities be discovered. This recognition of cultural relativity, however, is a two-edged sword; on the one hand it does justice to the complexity of social life but on the other it is difficult to move beyond the level of particularity. Interactionism yields "rich" data but one has to wonder how much of the results are generalizable to other groups and other contexts. Moreover, it does not explain why a particular social formation produces a socialization ideology that helps to ensure a particular athletic identity for someone with a disability.

**Future Research Directions**

It would be fair to say that research on disability sport socialization, and, therefore, research on the identity formation of athletes with disabilities, is in its infancy. It is an area of work that has important implications not only for any debate on identity formation but also for the more pragmatic aspects of participation such as targeting resources, providing opportunity structures, and so on. More research needs to be done, especially to progress the work from description toward explanation, and there is some merit in giving serious consideration to a number of theoretical and substantive points.

**Theoretical Considerations**

Perhaps the most urgent need is for the use of an adequate theoretical foundation. As we have seen, the use of structural-functionalism has produced some interesting results but it has been limited to only parts of the available theory. Missing from the first interpretations of Kenyon and McPherson (1981) was an emphasis on the social system. Incorporating such an emphasis into the simple conceptualization of socialization that has been used to date would produce at least four evident benefits. First, a much more comprehensive set of necessary antecedent conditions of sport role socialization are highlighted. There are three general conditions: the role aptitude of the individual, the system-induced propensity for role enactment, and role rehearsal (cf. Kenyon & McPherson, 1981, p. 220). Second, a set of system-level factors (e.g., values, norms, sanctions, situational facilities) that will operate singly and in combination within specific social systems in specific ways are provided. The only way to identify how they operate is to analyze each relevant system because the roles they produce will differ in
kind, milieu, and complexity from system to system. Third, the vital notion of reciprocity would be introduced to redress the unidirectionality. Through the social processes of imitation, identification, and reinforcement, individuals are active in their own socialization (cf. Williams, 1992). Fourth, substantive questions are raised about the different social contexts. For example, what types of sports and sport program structures are prevalent in particular disability sport contexts, and how do opportunities to participate (and therefore the socialization process) vary by impairment group, by geographical location within a country, and even by country?

However, even the full theory has some limitations, as McPherson (1986) pointed out in his call for a “new wave” of studies of sport socialization that would integrate theoretical perspectives. For him, Wentworth’s (1980) synthesis of the socialization problem is better than most—socialization operates on both the micro and macro levels and has five primary elements. These are “‘social structure, the specific social contexts where interaction occurs, the acquisition and use of power, the reciprocal process of interaction and the active role of the socializee’” (McPherson, 1986, p. 116). Some of these elements are addressed in the full use of structural-functionalism, notably social structure, but others are not, and some writers have attempted to incorporate them in conceptual frameworks that are variants of structural-functionalism, or that combine structural-functionalism with a micro perspective such as symbolic interactionism, or that draw on a cultural studies tradition.

Nixon (1990) has suggested that Turner’s (1988) “much-circumscribed functionalism” is a useful framework in the study of sport socialization. It is a model of personality and individual behavior that has several features of interest. It uses personality “as an accumulation of the lasting effects of past experiences” (Nixon, 1990, p. 37) that is expressed as behavior in social situations. A social situation is “the immediate temporal and spatial environment of a social encounter [and it is] embedded in broader sociocultural contexts” (Nixon, 1990, p. 37). In addition, there are four types of socializing mechanisms: (a) the reproduction of “societal patterns of behavior, attitudes, and sentiments to which people have been exposed in salient past social situations” (Nixon, 1990, p. 38); (b) reactions or adjustments that arise in “situations or relationships that are experienced as relatively frustrating or gratifying” (Nixon, 1990, p. 38); (c) adaptations to challenging situations and relationships; and (d) the construction of meanings and definitions of the situation (Nixon, 1990). Clearly, this framework has considerable relevance to the study of disability sport socialization. It would, for example, refocus attention on the individual in sport contexts rather than on impairment groups. These contexts are themselves historically, geographically, and culturally located, and focusing on them would highlight the constantly shifting relationship between individuals with disabilities and the social structures in which they live their sporting lives.

Greendorfer and Bruce (1991), on the other hand, have suggested that Goodman’s (1985) attempt to combine the structural-functionalist and interactionist approaches could be useful in the study of sport socialization. Such an integration would have many benefits for the study of disability sport socialization; as we have seen in the previous research on the topic the two approaches complement each other and provide a more comprehensive picture. In Goodman’s (1985) framework there are three processes involved in socialization: learning, social
interaction, and communication. However, as Greendorfer and Bruce (1991) have noted, this conceptualization does not take us much beyond where we are at the present time. Goodman’s contribution, they argue, is the identification of power as a dimension lacking in current socialization research, and they go on to present a persuasive case for the adoption of an approach that gives prominence to power, conflict, and ideology (Greendorfer & Bruce, 1991).

This type of approach addresses directly the cultural practices, including sport, that reinforce and legitimate socially constructed differences between individuals. Greendorfer and Bruce (1991) illustrate their points with gender examples, but this approach applies equally well to a consideration of disability. According to their argument:

[disability] sport socialization—the way we interpret, understand and deal with . . . the participation [of individuals with disabilities]—is a cultural reproduction of ideological social constructions of superiority and inferiority. (Greendorfer & Bruce, 1991, p. 140)

Such a stance would give more attention to both social structure and individual agency, to the acquisition of cultural rules, to how disability sport identities are made and modified, and to the relations of dependency that characterize interaction, for example, between individuals with disabilities and between individuals with and without disabilities.

Substantive Considerations

Substantive differences, as we have already seen, can be readily discerned in the research results of a number of studies produced to date. The task now is to extend this work to focus on specific sport identities, and there are four particular themes that may offer fruitful lines of inquiry.

The first is the process of socialization into roles associated with institutionalized physical activity and sport, in particular with a focus on role expectations. Role incumbents are expected to possess knowledge, skills, and dispositions that characterize the role in question, and so it is essential for researchers to specify the characteristics of a particular role before studying how that role is learned. There are many roles in the different sports that could be examined; they include, for example, elite performer, sub-elite performer, sport consumer, sport producer, and sport leader (Kenyon & McPherson, 1981, p. 217). Naturally, in sport as in other social contexts, there will be varying degrees of competence in the performance of these roles, and this needs to be studied. In particular the nonparticipant should be an important consideration, because for the most part this appears to be the most popular role among people with disabilities. However, this role and others are subject to cultural relativity and it is likely that the institutionalization of disability sport will differ, for example, from country to country. This has not been considered seriously to date except as a major source of problems in the implementation of policy among, for example, member states in the European Community (cf. Council of Europe, 1987).

The second is the notion of social relationships. This is a fundamental sociological concept that has been neglected, in particular the fact that the identities of individuals with disabilities per se tend to be the product of relations of dependency with people who are not disabled. Some elements of the identities...
of individuals with disabilities are constructed in social interaction with other individuals with disabilities but for the most part interaction with people who are not disabled is the more frequent. People who are not disabled, however, have stereotypical beliefs about people with disabilities and how they should act (e.g., melancholia, dependency, helplessness, etc.) that get passed on as de facto elements of identity to both individuals who are disabled and those who are not, and labeling takes place (Scott, 1981, p. 21). Much of this labeling occurs, and therefore some elements of the identities of individuals with disabilities are constructed, in social interaction with workers of disability sport agencies. These workers often have recourse to an ideology centered on charity (helping the helpless, the unfortunate, the weak, etc.; see Fulcher, 1989). Indeed, for an individual to come to the attention of a disability sport association it is almost inevitable that labeling will have occurred. Moreover, since these organizations are often staffed by workers who are not disabled, the individual with a disability is often the recipient of paternalism or maternalism. The literature on athletes with visual impairments (e.g., Sherrill, Pope, & Arnhold, 1986) and cerebral palsy (e.g., Sherrill & Rainbolt, 1986) illustrates well the influence of schools and disability sport organizations staffed by individuals who are not disabled on the socialization of individuals with disabilities, but the extant social relationships in which socialization occurs need to be considered much more explicitly.

The third theme is the particular social configurations, and their characteristics, that make up what is called disability sport (e.g., wheelchair basketball, goalball, etc.). Since it has been argued, here, that each sport identity will be produced by different configurations, then researchers need to focus on these differences and study them in some detail. The specificity of these social configurations is nowhere better illustrated than in the research on deaf sport produced by Stewart and his colleagues (Stewart et al., 1988, 1991). They have shown quite clearly that not only is the subculture of deaf sport different from other sports subcultures but it is the product of a specific and quite unique social milieu. This may include attendance at a school for the deaf, communications with others using sign language, a reduced exposure to the mass media, and perhaps some participation with hearing athletes and involvement with hearing coaches. Similar particularities can be seen in studies of cerebral palsy sport (Sherrill & Rainbolt, 1986), blind sport (Sherrill, Pope, & Arnhold, 1986) and wheelchair racing (Williams, 1992), and there is considerable merit in extending this research by focusing on the social structures that influence socialization and the formation of specific identities as sports men and women per se and as sports men and women with disabilities.

The fourth theme is social control and in particular the ways that sport may be a mechanism for the production of social conformity and individual compliance. The use of an increasingly "rights-oriented" discourse (cf. Fulcher, 1989) among people with disabilities in North America and Western Europe would indicate that individuals with disabilities are no longer satisfied with the established meanings of disability and the ways their lives are circumscribed by others; many see themselves as members of an oppressed group. Attention should be given, then, to power and social control as crucial resources to be acquired by individuals with disabilities and used in social interaction and the process of disability sport socialization. Sport, for example, may be a site of resistance for many athletes with disabilities against prevailing definitions of disability.
constructed by a largely nondisabled world, and this needs to be examined. The work of sociologists seeking to develop a social theory of disability would be particularly useful in this regard because it addresses, specifically, the cultural production of impairment and disability, the ideological construction of disability, and the structuring of identities of individuals with disabilities (cf. Abberley, 1987; Oliver, 1990).

Conclusion

Throughout the discussion the singular identity of an athlete with a disability has been used, after Lindstrom (1992), but it has been argued that the problem is complex. Disability sport socialization produces many identities of athletes with disabilities and they are apparently different. The research literature, however, has not addressed the question of whether Lindstrom's assumption of one identity is correct. Certainly the evidence of multiple identities does not negate one overarching identity of athletes with disabilities, but it would have to be theorized as a collective identity that either is held by all individuals who see themselves as disabled or is ascribed by the nondisabled majority to the minority who are disabled. The research evidence of heterogeneity, however, would not support one collective identity and it would be naive, perhaps, to force the issue when some sport identities may be poles apart from each other. For example if it is part of some disability sport identities that individuals are perceived to be dependent, helpless, and incompetent, then other groups will actively resist being associated with those identities. Lindstrom's (1992) argument for preserving the identity of athletes with disabilities, therefore, flounders on the results of descriptive research on disability sport socialization. That research, however, needs to be more sophisticated in its theoretical foundations if it is going to progress toward explanation and our understanding of such an important topic.

References


