



**BENDING MAINSTREAM DEFINITIONS OF SPORT,  
GENDER AND ABILITY**

Representations of wheelchair racers

KIM WICKMAN

Pedagogiska institutionen

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**Bending Mainstream Definitions of Sport, Gender and Ability. Representations of wheelchair racers (doctoral dissertation)**

Department of Education, Umeå University, Sweden

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## Abstract

Inspired by feminist post-structural thinking and with a discourse analytic approach, this study's main theme is gendered identity, disability and sport. It consists of four separate, but interrelated, empirical studies and focuses on two research questions. Firstly, how do female and male wheelchair racers construct and perform their identities? Secondly, how are female and male wheelchair racers represented in Swedish sports media? To answer the research questions, semi-structured interviews with wheelchair racers, and a critical analysis of sports media texts from the Paralympics in Sydney, 2000 have been conducted. In this dissertation the composition of unwritten regulations produced by the media texts, that shaped the practice of wheelchair athletes was conceptualized as the discourse of able-ism. Findings indicate that the sports media texts constructed the subject of 'disabled sportsman/sportswoman', which indirectly reproduced the conception of a copy and not an original. The exclusion was, however, concealed and neutralized through the regulation and differentiation that the discourse of able-ism legitimated. Although sports media still seems to reinforce negative stereotypes of disabled athletes, the wheelchair racers themselves are challenging the gender, sport and disability discourses and establishing new ways of being physically powerful and excellent in and outside the sports arena. In fact, when the athletes got the opportunity to make their voices heard in media, they re-dressed the twisted picture of wheelchair racing as passive rehabilitation training into elite sport. Consequently, it seems that wheelchair racing and its high status in disability sports empowers both male and female racers which increases their possibility to be represented as 'real' sportsmen and sportswomen. Finally, although, the athletes have shown that wheelchair racing has a given place in modern sport, 'being able' as an athlete and being a gendered individual are still strongly connected to the appearance and performance of the un-impaired body.

**Keywords:** able-ism, disability, discourse, gender, identity, representation, sports media, Paralympics, wheelchair racing.



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# CONTENTS

PROLOGUE .....	9
The study's scope .....	10
I. THEORETICAL APPROACH .....	11
Discourse analysis – looking for patterns in language .....	11
Power, identity, representation and subject positions.....	14
Disability studies – concepts and terms .....	17
The medical and social model of disability.....	17
Disabled people or people with disabilities.....	18
II. PREVIOUS RESEARCH .....	21
Gender and sport.....	21
Gender, disability and sport .....	23
Media representations of gendered and disabled athletes .....	24
Feminism(s) and the understanding of disability.....	27
Knowledge gaps in previous research .....	28
III. METHODS .....	31
The study.....	32
Context and social setting.....	32
Selection of research topic – the object of research .....	33
Personal experiences .....	34
Analytic framework – guideline of discourse analysis.....	34
Selection and organization of previous research.....	35

Locating and identifying social practices – discourses within previous research .....	36
The disability discourse .....	37
The gender discourse.....	38
The sport discourse.....	38
Some comments on the located discourses.....	39
Identifying and analyzing social practices – discourses within empirical material ..	40
The role of the researcher.....	41
Ethical considerations .....	42
IV. SUMMARY OF THE ARTICLES.....	45
Article I, Gender and disability – some reflections on recent sports science research .....	45
Article II, “I try to be as athletic like, forget the other side of me” – Construction of Elite Female Wheelchair Athletes’ Identities .....	47
Article III, The discourse of able-ism – gendered wheelchair athletes in the Swedish sports media .....	49
Article IV, “I do not compete in disability”: How wheelchair athletes challenge the discourse of able-ism through action and resistance .....	51
V. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS .....	53
Re-thinking ability.....	53
Wheelchair racing and power relations.....	54
Bending the mainstream definition of ability and gender.....	55
Athletes from the margins to the centre .....	56
Methodological challenges.....	57
Future considerations.....	57
EPILOGUE.....	57
REFERENCES.....	59

## PROLOGUE

The Annual Swedish Sporting Awards is a gala dinner and prize-ceremony. Among the awards presented are the seven awards of the Swedish Academy of Sports, Svenska Dagbladet's 'Bragdguld' medal and the 'Jerringpriset', which is awarded on the basis of a tele-vote held during the evening. Both Swedish Television and Swedish Radio broadcast the event live. This prize-ceremony is for most sportswomen and sportsmen a very prestigious one; being nominated carries the honour of having been selected as one of the very best and entails a lot of publicity in Swedish media. Three years ago, one of Sweden's most successful female wheelchair racers, Madelene Nordlund, was nominated to the category, 'the disabled athlete of the year'. She, however, declined the nomination. Her official explanation was simply that she identified herself as a female elite athlete competing in wheelchair racing, not as an un-gendered disabled athlete doing disability sport. She also stated that this was a personal standpoint which had nothing to do with the way others who are by definition 'disabled athletes' construct their identities. 'Who I am' became essential to Madelene. She claimed her subjectivity through sport and in that sense she both rejected and deconstructed her assigned role of invisibility as an elite athlete and gendered being. For most people, this was probably an unexpected action. Whether or not the fact remains, Madelene received more media attention and publicity by declining the nomination than those athletes who finally shared the prize and the title 'the best disabled athlete of the year'.

As has been illustrated by the story of Madelene, the contemporary era is marked by ambiguities and contradictions in the discursive meanings and implications of disabled women's (and men's) athleticism. In its broadest sense, this dissertation thinks through some of the complex issues raised by concepts such as disability, ability, femininity, masculinity and elite sport. In my view, disability cannot be explored, without simultaneously critically scrutinizing gender and what it means to be able; these are two of the stumbling blocks in this dissertation. As it seeks to uncover and illuminate the ways in which the very thinking of what is possible in the life of wheelchair racers is foreclosed by certain social sanctions and taken-for-granted presumptions, Madelene's and other athletes critical actions against inequalities and marginalization in sport certainly require consideration.

In contrast to writing a monograph, the series of articles that form this dissertation have been constrained by various journal editors' demands. This introduction, therefore, serves to present and develop features that were left out of the articles. These features comprise how the research developed, and the

ideas and new insights that emerged but could not be included in the articles. It further expands the discussion concerning the dissertation's main theme: the relationship between gender, disability and sport with identity construction and media representation. This introduction also develops theoretical, methodological and analytical concerns of the research process. Thereafter, the introduction ends with a summary of the four articles and a concluding reflection.

### **The study's scope**

This dissertation deals with the complex interaction of discourses about gender, disability and sport, and illustrates how these operate within the context of wheelchair racing. This dissertation focuses on two research questions. First, it examines how female and male wheelchair racers construct and perform their identities. My intention has been to further the understanding of how gender and ability operate within sport. Second, this dissertation reviews how the representation of male and female wheelchair athletes in newspapers fosters popular understandings of disabled athletes as 'second rate performers', as normal and natural. Such media representations of disabled people have become fundamental not only in shaping the athletes' identities but also for wider notions of disability and the resultant expectations derived from these notions. Overall, this dissertation identifies the sports media as having the potential to challenge and change oppressive discourses and relations in society which disempower and subordinate disabled men and women.

# I. THEORETICAL APPROACH

## Discourse analysis – looking for patterns in language

Sport has long been considered by scholars to be a miniature society in which power relations, marginalization and social exclusion take place (Creedon, 1994; Markula & Pringle, 2006; Whannel, 2002). Although, disability sport has grown rapidly as a cultural phenomenon in the past few decades, and the trend for sport and disability is toward inclusion and acceptance, very little research has addressed disabled athletes experiences of competitive sports (Hardin & Hardin, 2003; Hargreaves, 2000a; Huang & Brittain, 2006). Moreover, mainstream media have resisted responding in ways that transcend exclusion and the stereotyping of disabled athletes (Hardin & Hardin, 2003; Schantz & Gilbert 2001).

The relationship between gender and disability has, however, been a cause of concern for some critical social scientists. Disabled women have, for example, criticized the failure of feminist theory to include disability, and the masculine bias of the disability movement and un-gendered theorizing around disability issues have also been highlighted (Meekosha, 1998: 165). In relation to the links between sport, gender and disability, Schell and Rodriguez (2001: 128) have pointed out a neglect of gender aspects in current disability sport research. They have stressed, for example, that gender is a key factor that should be considered when examining disability sport because female bodies like, so called broken bodies or disabled bodies are believed to be restrictive and incapable of meaningful corporality, including participating in sport. How is it then possible to investigate and analyze the representations of disabled people in general and of male and female wheelchair athletes in particular? Clearly, language is as Fairclough (2003) pointed out, central to shaping values and meanings which impact on social life:

*Language is an irreducible part of social life, dialectically interconnected with other elements of social life, so that social analysis and research always has to take account on language* (Fairclough, 2003: 2).

Interpretation and analysis of language have been manifested in a range of different approaches within cultural and social research. As a result of this, discourse/text analysis has a wide reference and can describe very different

research activities and different data (Hall, 2001; Markula & Pringle, 2006). Consequently, it is best understood as a field of research rather than a single practice (Taylor, 2001: 5).

A dominant position in discourse analytic research is, however, that reality is assumed to be discursive and that different social categories are created, become accessible and get meaning through language (Hall, 2001; Markula & Pringle, 2006). Accordingly, the term discourse is also used in a range of different contexts (Fairclough, 2003; Poynton & Lee, 2000). For instance, in reference to social practices that regulate the production and flow of statements, and perceptions of reality:

*I believe I have in fact added to its meanings: treating it sometimes as the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements (Foucault, 1972: 8).*

Thus, discourse illustrates how language, socially constructed rules and regulations govern who is able to speak, who will be hushed up and who will not be able to make their voice heard in a certain context or according to a certain issue (Hall, 2001; Mills, 1997; Wright, 2004a). Further, within the rules of a discourse, it makes sense to say only certain things. The discourse allows certain people to be subjects of statements and others to be objects. From my viewpoint, discourse is more than a communication of knowledge; discourse also includes social practice, power relations and forms of representation.

When focusing on representations of wheelchair racers, I have found Michel Foucault (1926-1984), particularly relevant. He draws attention to the ways in which discursive practices create powerful meanings that prescribe human activity and assert that this is a means by which culture attempts to normalize people and their bodies. Consequently, in an attempt to locate discourse and discourse analysis I will continue to discuss my approach with references to Foucault.

My way of doing discourse analysis has much in common with Fairclough's (2001) model of critical discourse analysis (CDA). However, I have not applied it strictly since the works of other social theorists that focus on discourse and language have also influenced me. This means that I will only discuss those of Fairclough's assumptions that I have perceived as crucial to my analysis. In short, Fairclough's CDA is explicitly critical and provides a way of moving between close analysis of texts and interactions, and social analysis of various types. Further, it is critical in it aims to show non-obvious ways in which language is involved in social relations of power and domination. In that sense, it is committed to progressive social change (ibid). An important difference, however, between Fairclough's discourse analysis and post-structuralist

discourse analysis (and my own position) is that the former makes a distinction between discursive and non-discursive social practices (Fairclough, 1992: 73). Researchers in the tradition of critical theory scholars do not usually aim or claim to capture the truth of reality because of the dynamic nature of the social world (Taylor, 2001). From my position there is no such thing as discursive or non-discursive social practice – all social activities are considered to be consequences of interacting, competing or conflicting discourses. Nevertheless, Fairclough distances himself from structuralism and comes closer to a more post-structuralist position claiming that discursive practice not only reproduces the already existing discursive structure but also challenges the structure by using words to denote what may lie outside it (Philips & Jørgensen, 2002: 65).

Furthermore, as gender is a central aspect, my discourse analytic approach draws on feminist post-structuralist language theory. In fact, during the past few decades the use of discourse analysis among feminists and others who represent disadvantaged groups has increased. Primarily, because the approach makes visible how language operates to produce the oppressive structures of the world (Fairclough, 2001; Pierre, 2000). How is it then possible to challenge discourses and their constructions of realities through social institutions? As Hekman (1990: 187) argues thinking different is possible, because discourses are not 'closed systems'. The silences and ambiguities of discourse provide the possibilities of refashioning them, the discovery of other conceptualizations and the adjustment of accepted truths. In fact, there are always several conflicting discourses at play and one discourse can never be dominant enough to become the only discourse that structures the social context. For instance, two discourses can collide in an antagonistic relationship to one another when they try to define the same terrain. Antagonisms are then dissolved through hegemony, whereby one discourse conquers the terrain and appears as the objective reality (Wright, 2004a). Consequently, the aim of discourse analysis, as I see it, is not to uncover the so called 'objective reality' but to explore how people create reality so that it appears objective and natural. Once a discourse has become 'normal' and 'natural', it is difficult to think and act outside it. Other statements and other ways of thinking remain unintelligible, outside the realm of possibility (Pierre, 2000: 485). A further complexity is that discourses can themselves be seen as combinations of other discourses articulated together in particular ways. According to Fairclough (2003: 126) this is how new discourses emerge through combining existing discourses together in particular ways.

The approach of discourse analysis which I have chosen to concentrate on is based on social constructivism. Briefly, social constructivism can be described as an umbrella term for a range of theories about culture and society and as a broader category of which post-structuralism is a subcategory (Philips & Jørgensen, 2002). Doing social scientific analysis of social events or texts,

however, entails shifting away from our ordinary experience of them. Hence, discourse analysis has been a tool which I have used to understand and interpret conversations in talk and text to generate new knowledge about social life.

In order to introduce some clarity into the key concepts of power, identity, representation and subject position, and how these concepts are interconnected, these terms will now be presented.

## **Power, identity, representation and subject positions**

The first concept is power. Sport can be recognized as an institution that involves technologies of power such as normalization, classification and exclusion. Foucault (1977) uses the term discourse to examine how power, language and institutional practices combine at historically specific points in time to determine models of thought. Unlike the sovereign theories of power, Foucault (*ibid.*) argues that modern power operates invisibly, but is visible in its effects, and that power is transferred when the subject interacts with social environments. Further, Foucault's work illustrates the production of power in every individual's thoughts, acts and understandings of what is right, real and normal. Such an understanding of power means that people are both producers and products of competing discourses, and can only understand and conceptualize the world from within competing discourses (Foucault, 1979). In this manner, when we draw on stereotypical gender and disability notions we reproduce and reinforce repressive patterns which keep us or others in disempowered or powered positions. Consequently, power is not, according to Foucault (1997), considered to be the property of the dominant group or individual. Rather it exists in relationships; therefore, he hardly uses the word 'power' but speaks about how to analyze techniques of power or power relations/relations of power (Foucault, 1983).

Further, one of the great instruments of power is normalization which on the one hand imposes homogeneity, but on the other hand individualizes by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialities and to render the differences useful by fitting them one to another (Foucault, 1991: 184). In sport as social practice, measures, examinations, records, classifications, rewards, for example, qualify the subject.

Power relations are considered to be multiplicities that are not fixed once and for all but are unbalanced, heterogeneous, unstable and tense. Power is productive and can be found in the effects of liberty as well as in the effects of domination. Moreover, according to Foucault, discipline blocks relations of power in that it objectifies and fixes people under its gaze and does not allow them to circulate in unpredictable ways. Foucault's understanding of power relations is based on the assumption that one can never be outside relations of

power, whether disciplinary or otherwise, therefore resistance is always possible, and, most importantly ‘power relations’ are obliged to change through resistance (Foucault, 1997, 1984). Consequently, within a relation of power there is a necessity of resistance, because if there were no space of resistance – of escape or refuse – there would be no relations of power (Foucault, 1987).

Foucault’s theory of discourse also illustrates that shifts in historical thought take place when people think of different things to say. For this reason, challenge and resistance to dominating discourses is possible. Even though the sport discourse, for example, is potentially open for negotiation, the process occurs in social realms where all voices do not have the same opportunities to be heard (Markula & Pringle, 2006). However, when oppressed groups can locate and name the discourse and practice of marginalization and social exclusion, they can begin to refuse them. As an illustrative example, post-structural critique of knowledge and discourse has allowed, feminists to theorize feminism as a ‘reserve discourse’; one that circulates alongside patriarchal discourses (Pierre, 2000).

Foucault argues that human sciences help to construct universal classifications of people and in that process people become objectified. This means that a subject can be classified via norms and standard deviations into selected groups. In the case of disability, subjects tend to become objects under the regime of medical truth. People undergoing treatment for spinal cord injuries, for example, go through processes of institutionalization that include exposure to discourses which contribute to constructing them as disabled. The power of such an objectification process results in the production of ‘tetraplegics’, ‘quadriplegics’, ‘cerebral palsies’, ‘spina bifidas’, to name just a few.

The second analytic concept that I intend to introduce is identity, which is central to post-structuralist thinking. Identities are considered to be multiple and constantly reconstituted in and through discourse (Wright, 2004a). In the same way as participants in the American reality TV show ‘The Swan’ (2006) seek to transform themselves from ugly ducklings into beautiful swans through plastic surgery, cosmetic dental treatment and fitness programs, people often try, in general, to position themselves normatively (rather than on the margins or non-normatively) in relation to dominant discourses (Wickman, in press). Such hegemonic discourses produce social and cultural expectations of how human beings should look and act and they also govern the way people construct their identities (Johansson, 2000). Further, identity is regarded as unstable and insecure depending on which discourses are reproduced by the subject. In order to maintain any sense of ‘who I am’, the subjects have to participate constantly in the process of construction and reconstruction of the boundaries of their selves through an ongoing process of differentiating themselves from the ‘other’ (Thomas, 1999; Weedon, 1997). In that sense, no

individual subject has a single or complete or unitary self-identity. Hence, identity can be considered as a production that is never complete and always constituted within, not outside representation (Hall, 1990; Tremain, 2005). Echoing these points, Barker and Galasinski (2001) note:

*We are born into a world that pre-exists us and learn to use a language which was here long ago before we arrived. In short, we are formed as individuals in a social process using culturally shared materials. Without language, not only would we not be persons as we commonly understand that concept, but the very concept of personhood and identity would be unintelligible to us* (Barker & Galasinski, 2001: 29).

Identity construction in post-structuralism is thus a heterogeneous and incomplete process and an ongoing activity. As individuals inserted into specific discourses, we repeatedly perform models of identity until these are experienced as if they were second nature. Where they are successfully internalized, they become part of a lived identity. Where this does not occur, they may become the basis of dis-identification or counter-identification which involves a rejection of hegemonic identity norms (Weedon, 2004: 7). Such rejection of hegemonic identity norms will then impact on the power relation between the struggling discourses at play. For many post-structural theorists, identity is associated with being more regulatory and exclusionary than progressive and liberating. Rather than being fixed, identity is understood as plastic and changeable but specific to a certain time and social and cultural context (Barker & Galasinski, 2001).

The third analytic concept is representation. The construction of any representation of 'reality' is, according to Barker and Galasinski (2001) necessarily selective, entailing decisions as to which aspects of that reality to include and how to arrange them. When we construct our identities as social beings we (re-) present ourselves in alliance with a particular discourse and the subject positions it provides. Consequently, we try to construct a specific image of ourselves (Johansson, 2000). Representation is therefore intimately related to identity but it also signifies the images mediated by the media which characterize femininity, masculinity, ability and elite sport.

The fourth analytic concept is subject position which can be defined as 'locations' within a conversation (Edley, 2001). Living persons are required to 'take up' a subject position in discourse in order to make sense of the world and appear coherent to others. A subject position is that perspective or set of regulated discursive meanings from which discourse makes sense. To speak is to take up a subject position and to be subjected to the regulatory power of that discourse (Barker & Galasinski, 2001: 31). Thus, we can establish that identity and subject position are by definition closely related concepts. Further, the

subject is able to occupy any of a number of subject positions in different discourses at a time. However, only some of these positions are available to the subject (Mills, 1997).

The struggles of disabled men and women are of relevance to this study and considered to be local and specific rather than totalizing. From this position, I consider relations of power as complex, contradictory and shifting and that resistance and flexibility are daily ongoing practices. My aim has been to investigate wheelchair racing which is one of the situations where representations, power relations, resistance and flexibility are found. The gender, sport and disability discourses are considered as interacting, competing and conflicting practices which shape perceptions of reality that systematically form the object of which they speak.

## Disability studies – concepts and terms

Throughout history there have been different theoretical approaches to disability and impairment (Barnes, Mercer & Shakespeare, 2005). In this section I shed light on the main approaches. These are the medical model of disability and the social model of disability. The section ends with a discussion as to whether the concept *disabled people* or the concept *people with disability* should be used in disability studies.

### The medical and social model of disability

In Western countries, the main debates about impairment and disability have been between proponents of the medical and the social models (Barnes & Mercer, 2003; Shakespeare, 2004; Thomas, 2004). These models can be regarded as forming opposing parts of the same frame. The medical model locates disability as an individual's problem tied to the functional limitations of impaired bodies (Price & Shildrick, 1998; Swain, French & Cameron, 2003). Whereas, the social model theory rests on the distinction between disability, which is socially created, and the impairment, which is referred to as a physical attribute of the body (Corker & French, 1999: 2). In the United States, the social model is more commonly referred to as the 'minority group' model of disability (Williams, 2001), whereas in Britain, disability is regarded as something imposed on top of impairments by the way impaired people are unnecessarily oppressed, isolated and excluded from full participation in society (UPIAS, 1976: 14). In different terms, the British version of the social model distinguishes between the impairments that people have, and the oppression which they experience (Watson, 2004: 102). One could say that the British version is a direct challenge to the medical model and has succeeded in shifting debate about disability from biomedical dominated agendas to discourses about politics and citizenship by focusing on the ways in which disability is socially

produced (Turner, 2001). The British version of the social model of disability has dominated Swedish disability research (Grönvik, 2007) and it is this version I refer in this dissertation when referring to the social model.

Both the medical- and the social model of disability have been critically scrutinized by post-modern scholars and feminist scholars (Söder, 2005). Thomas (1999), for instance, has argued that the social model of disability fails to deal with many dimensions of personal experiences relating to impairment and identity, and denies the bodied experiences of pain and affiliation which are integral to the lives of many people with impairments. An identified problem is that interests of people who have particular forms of impairment (for example deafness, mental-illness, learning difficulties) are seen to be ill-served or under-represented by the social model because their experiences and needs do not fit the model (Shakespeare, 1994). Similarly, Shakespeare (2004) pointed out that there are theoretical difficulties with the social model of disability and argues that there is a risk that dimensions of people's experiences of class, race, gender and sexuality might be ignored. Moreover, Shakespeare and Watson (2001) underline that many disabled people do not construct themselves as disabled, in terms of either the medical or the social model. Rather, they downplay the significance of their impairments and look for access to a mainstream identity. Further, Hughes and Paterson (1997) assert that a problematic issue with the social model of disability is that the body is reduced to impairment and illness, and the connection between disablement and the body is given no attention. This dualistic thinking makes the sociology of impairment unthinkable. Consequently, the understanding of the body as a social and historical construct and as a sight of meaning is lost (ibid).

### **Disabled people or people with disabilities**

An issue that gives rise to discussion is whether the term 'disabled people' or 'people with disabilities' should be used. DePauw and Gavron (2005) prefer the 'people-first' language, such as 'athletes with disabilities' or 'athletes with visual impairments' as they consider that this approach acknowledges persons as individuals rather than focusing on the disability. In a similar way, Zola (1993) put people first and prefers to talk about 'people with disabilities'. Oliver and Barnes (1998) and Wendell (1989) however, emphasize a number of important negative implications arising from the tendency to place the word 'people' before 'disability' as it implicitly indicates that disability is a property of people with impairment and not society. Placing the word 'disabled' before the word 'people', on the other hand, is a political statement arising from the understanding that disability is 'done' to people rather than being something that they 'have' (Swain, French & Cameron, 2003). In this dissertation I have used both. In article II I used 'people with disabilities' but in the three following articles I use the latter, i.e. 'disabled people'. This decision was taken

## I. THEORETICAL APPROACH

as I gradually and more thoroughly considered disability a social and discursive construction. Moreover, even though impairment can be questioned as an exclusively biological fact, I intended to use the term 'athletes with impairments' in contexts where it would be conceivable to only use 'athletes', but as able-bodied athletes and athletes with impairments are sometimes compared, this would be confusing.



## II. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

In sport, ability, femininity and masculinity are demonstrated, and the able and gendered body is confirmed, admired and commercialized within, for instance, the media and the sport fashion industry (Hall, 1996; Knight & Giuliano, 2003; Whannel, 2002; Wright, 2000). Accordingly, scientific discussion has clearly stressed that sport is a gendered activity that not only welcomes men more readily than women, but also able-bodied more than disabled athletes (Hargreaves, 2000a). Further, it serves as a site for celebrating skills and values marked as masculine (Birrell, 2000). The key issues discussed in sociological studies of gender are the manner in which sport reproduces or challenges hegemonic masculinity and the social conditions that underlie and enable these processes. Consequently, sport has proven to be one of the key institutional sites for the study of the social construction of gender (Dworkin & Messner, 2002) and ability (Hargreaves, 2000a).

### Gender and sport

Throughout history a variety of struggles around women's athleticism and female sports have occurred; these have been riddled with complexities and contradictions (Birrell, 2000; Markula & Pringle, 2006). Since the late 1980s critical sport oriented scholarship has grown in prominence and sport sociologists have drawn on a wider range of theorists to help examine the works of power associated with sport (McKay, Messner & Sabo, 2000). Within this context the ideas of Michel Foucault have been increasingly drawn upon and his tools concerning the workings of discourse, power and knowledge and the production of disciplined and normalized subjectivities have subsequently shaped the social sciences (Andrews, 2000). Further, Foucault's work has also spawned specific research methods, such as discourse analysis (Markula & Pringle, 2006). Some of the international sport sociologists who have been inspired by Foucault are Cole (1994), Hall (2002), Hargreaves (1986) and Theberge (1991).

An examination of the marginalization of women in sport reveals that increasingly sophisticated efforts have been made to combat gender stereotypes and challenge the hegemony of masculinity. For example, feminist theorists have been struggling towards a more complete understanding of the possibilities of empowerment and resistance through sport which the complex dynamic power relations are a fundamental part (Birrell, 2000; Hall, 2002; Hargreaves, 2000a, 2000b; Kay, 2003; Scraton & Flintoff, 2002; Theberge, 2000). This

issue has also been dealt with by several Scandinavian researchers for instance, Fasting (2005), Hovden (2005), Larsson (2001) and Olofsson (1989, 2002). Some scholars argue that sport as a social institution serves in different ways to construct mainstream values which often privilege white heterosexual middle-class men and marginalize, among others, women (Kay, 2003; Olofsson, 2003, 2005; Wright, 2004b) and disabled athletes (Hargreaves, 2000a, Schell & Rodriguez, 2001). In that sense, sport can be considered as a gendered and able-bodied activity as it serves as a site for celebrating skills and values clearly linked to masculinity and physical ability (Birrell, 2000; Schell & Rodriguez, 2001; Wendell, 1997).

From a national perspective, gender and gender differences have been a central theme in Swedish sport sociologic, pedagogic and ethnographic research for several decades. Some dissertations of relevance to this dissertation are; *Do Women have a Sporting Chance? Organized Sport and Women in Sweden in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, by Eva Olofsson published 1989. Her work was the first Swedish feminist doctoral dissertation in this field. In contrast to previous studies, Olofsson did not just describe the gender issues; she got deep into the problematic aspects of the relationship between men and women within sport. Olofsson primarily discussed the explicit and implicit conditions of women's participation in sport offered by the Swedish Sport confederation and member organisations. In 1999 Nathalie Koivula defended her doctoral dissertation, *Gender in Sport* that focused on how gender acts as an organizing principle in sport. In 2000, Birgitta Fagrell published, *The mini constructors. Girls and boys about femininity and masculinity in relation to body, sports, family and work*. In 2001 Håkan Larsson's doctoral dissertation, *The social construction of gender in sport. A history of the present of the sportsman and the sportswoman*, was published. Both Fagrell and Larsson investigated sport and gender from a post-structural perspective. Larsson, in particular, brought light on the construction of manliness and womanliness in sport and he discussed sport in relation to research.

Men's experiences of sport has also been examined and the processes whereby gender is produced. In 2003 Jesper Fundberg's doctoral dissertation; *Come on Lads! Boy's Football and Masculinities* was published. In his ethnographical study Fundberg explored the complexities of the relation between masculinity and sport. Further, he described the activities of a boys' football team and analyzed the game of football as a context for male socialization. In 2007 Jesper Andreasson's doctoral dissertation, *The Gender of Sport. Gender, Body and Sexuality in Everyday life of Team Sport*, was published. In his dissertation Andreasson analyzed and described how gender, the body and sexuality are constructed within Swedish team sports. Further, Andreasson investigated how male and female athletes perceive themselves, their physical bodies and communal spirit of sport of which they were a part.

In sum, despite considerable advances in the conditions of women's participation over the past hundred years, sport remains a powerful vehicle for construction of an ideology of gender difference. This ideology is grounded in the association of gender and physicality. While the accomplishments of women athletes should have put to rest any vestiges of the myth of female frailty, contradictions and ambiguities about the meanings of women's athleticism continue. Challenges to masculine hegemony are countered by the continued marginalization and heterosexualization of female athletes and women's sports.

### **Gender, disability and sport**

The growing field of disability studies represents many theoretical perspectives and a number of approaches including Marxist, feminist and post-structuralist. Some of these approaches call attention to the social oppression of disabled people, and others spotlight the cultural and ideological construction of impaired bodies (Shakespeare, 2000; Barnes & Mercer, 2004). In the Nordic countries, much of the research has been conducted within the medical model of disability that has the effect of directing attention to clinical issues, rehabilitation and special education, and as a result has often been connected to departments and colleges for professional training. Recently, disability researchers concerned with the historical, cultural, societal, ethical and environmental dimensions of disability and societal marginalization, have gained greater prominence (Kristiansen & Traustadóttir, 2004).

There has been a growing recognition over the past ten years of the importance of investigating the relationships between gender and disability as they are played out in sport. For example, Blinde and McCallister (1999) explore the experiences of women with impairments in the sport and physical fitness activity domain, and remind us that few research studies have focused specifically on the influence of gender in the disability and sport context. Kolkka and Williams' (1997) introduction to a sociological perspective on gender in the context of disability sport participation is a valuable contribution to the serious discussion of how gender, disability and sport can be approached from a theoretical position. DePauw and Gavron's (2005) second edition of 'Disability Sport' provides an overview of the historical background of female athletes with disabilities in sport. In 'Heroines of sport' Hargreaves (2000a) points out that disabled women's engagement in sport has helped to change the public perceptions of disability. In particular, as sport is one of few institutions in society where disabled women can transform their bodies, previously characterized through medical discourses as defective and pathological, into bodies that echo ability and empowerment.

A common argument is, however, that, while feminism legitimately describes the sexual objectification of women, disabled women (and disabled men) often encounter 'asexual objectification', the assumption that sexuality is inappropriate in disabled people (Garland-Thomson, 2004: 89). Consequently, the construction of disability is very powerful and results in people being viewed as disabled and not as men, women, straight or gay (Shakespeare, 1996). However, despite the fact that the gender discourse in many ways reflects general and powerful structures in society of, for instance male privilege and power and female disadvantages and subordination, women are no longer necessarily in the shadow of men. In fact, historically there have always been women and men who have transgressed boundaries of masculinity, femininity and heterosexuality (Hargreaves, 2004; Olofsson, 2002, 2003). DePauw (1997b) claims that disabled women throughout history have searched for the best possibilities for training and competition in order to develop their skills and achievements. In her article DePauw give several examples of disabled women who have participated in the Olympics (not Paralympics). For instance, Liz Hartel from Denmark who had post polio and won a silver medal in dressage at the 1952 Helsinki Olympics. In the Olympics in Los Angeles, 1984 Neroli Fairhall represented New Zealand in archery. She competed from her wheelchair. In Atlanta, 1996, Paola Fantato from Italy defended her national colours in archery. In sum, these scholars are critical to the fact that research results based on disabled men often are generalized to disabled women. Similarly, research results based on able-bodied women are generalized to disabled women.

## Media representations of gendered and disabled athletes

The media impacts tremendously upon which sports and athletes achieve public recognition, sponsorship and sport star status. Sports media focus heavily on attractive female athletes, thereby trivializing woman's athletic achievements (Giulianotti, 2005; Hovden, 2003). The media also has a huge impact on notions and expectations of what 'real' sport is and should be about. In fact, it is well documented in international (Creedon, 1994; Duncan, 2006; Rowe, 2004; Whannel, 2000, 2002) as well as national (Koivula, 1999; Olofsson, 2002, 2003) research that women's and men's sport are far from equally reported and that sports media often undermine, trivialize and minimize women's performances. Ruddell and Shinew (2006) argue that due to the limited exposure and negative stereotyping of disabled athletes, the media does not typically play a large role, and may even hinder socialization into specific sports. Research has shown that women's team sports in particular have been underrepresented in the media. Female athletes have received most coverage in

individual sports and in those that are traditionally 'acceptable' for women (for example gymnastics, aerobics, figure skating, and swimming). Women have also been represented according to cultural stereotypes that associate femininity with weakness, dependency, emotion and modesty (Birrell, 1988; Hovden, 2003; Theberge, 2000). Male sport magazines like *Café Sport* pay for celebrity athletes to pose more or less naked. Some female athletes (for instance the Swedish high jumper Kajsa Berqvist and the swimmer Therese Alshammar) have posed to get publicity. According to Giulianotti (2005: 88), despite arguments regarding self-expression and choice, such measures reflect these athletes' weak structural position within sport; self-sexualization is a desperate strategy to generate male-dominated public interest and corporate backing. Moreover, women have been framed in terms of their status in their private sphere, for instance as daughters, wives, girlfriends or mothers (Pirinen, 2002). One may wonder if this is a problem which disabled female athletes also face. In the next section I have selected studies that investigate gender and disability within sports media from a critical position.

According to Schell and Duncan (1999) the TV productions of Paralympics (the equivalent of the Olympics for disabled athletes) gives a low budget impression. The commentators focus on the story behind the athlete's disability and the extraordinary obstacles he or she has overcome. The commentators also trivialize their Paralympians' losses and suggest that athletes are simply grateful to be present at the games. Moreover, Schell and Duncan argued that the commentators did not focus on the rules, strategies, and physical mastery which furthers the impression of the Paralympics as if it is not a real sporting event, nor that Paralympians are real athletes. However, they also stated that there were no sexist or demeaning descriptions of the female Paralympians in comparison to coverage of female Olympians. One explanation given by the authors was that disabled people commonly are regarded as aesthetically unpleasing and asexual.

Schantz and Gilbert (2001) confirm Schell's and Duncan's (1999) findings by demonstrating that there is no sport specific coverage regarding disabled athletes. Schell and Duncan assert that disabled athletes are rarely represented in media and when they do get media attention it is often in the shape of 'the second rate performer' or 'the super hero who has overcome the disability'. Further, the authors emphasize that media reinforce rather than challenge negative stereotypes of disability that result in a marginalization and trivialization of the athletes and their performances.

In a case study Schell and Rodriguez (2001) explored, through the example of a female Paralympian, how disabled athletes claim subjectivity through sport. They found that the female Paralympian was portrayed as a 'supercrip' and as an exceptional role model for other disabled athletes. The media depicted her impairment caused by a previous accident as it had freed her from the female

body that trapped her iron will and free spirit. In contrast to coverage of able-bodied sports women, the female Paralympian's sexuality and social involvement with other people were not mentioned. According to the authors this finding is two-fold. On one hand, it means that media does not exploit the female athlete as a sexual object. On the other hand it may also be understood as abjection of disabled women as sexual undesirable. Finally, Schell and Rodriguez claim that gender is a key aspect regarding disability sport studies as women's bodies in resemblance to injured bodies and impaired bodies are considered to be limited and incapable, and therefore do not deserve a given place in the sport context.

Thomas and Smith (2003) stressed that medical terminology is often used by sports media when describing Paralympians and their performance. Further, they argue that disabled athletes are commonly compared with able-bodied athletes. When the media compare disabled and able-bodied athletes in an attempt to make them equal, it results in a reinforcement and conformity of the able-bodied ideal.

Hardin and Hardin (2003) confirm what has been stated in several of the above studies, namely the absence of media representation of disabled athletes furthers the understanding that sport and disability are not connected. This taken-for-granted truth has a negative impact on disabled athletes' identity constructions. Moreover, the authors claim that this understanding is so dominant that it makes the disabled athletes believe that they do not deserve to be respected as real athletes, at least not until they have proved what they can do. In this manner, cultural values of individualism, braveness and hard work are maintained.

In this context I will also mention the doctoral dissertation of Karin Ljuslinder (2002) *At Close Quarters no one is normal; Disability – discourses in Swedish Television 1956-2000*. In her dissertation Ljuslinder brings light on the public service media role in the discrepancy between political rhetoric and practice. Ljuslinder draws the conclusion that the amount of broadcast hours of disabled persons and programmes that deal with disability issues is the same as it was 1956. Further, she claims that even though it seems like Swedish Television (SVT) is trying to promote the goals of disability-politics the consequences however appear to be that SVT instead counteracts them in their attempt to normalize disability and disabled people.

As have been confirmed by the presentation of previous studies, media representations of disabled athletes are very limited in relation to conventional sports or sports for able-bodied athletes. Further, there is a strong bias in the media that focuses primarily on the impairment and therefore underestimate the sport specific skills, performance and achievements. Elite sports women are rarely depicted as female sport heroes but rather as disabled athletes. Additionally, previous research clearly indicates that disabled sportsmen get

more media attention than disabled sportswomen and that wheelchair sports are prioritized to a higher degree than other disability sports (Schantz & Gilbert, 2001). Social and cultural constructed ideals and stereotypes of gender, sexuality and certain body compositions contribute to limit the efforts of marginalized groups to claim subjectivity through sport practice. Moreover, previous research points to the fact that an increased number of disabled sportswomen have contributed to an increase in media attention. It appears as if the media has a tendency to reinforce rather than challenge dominating notions and expectations of sport as a masculine and able-bodied domain.

In the next section I highlight some aspects of the development of feminism from the position of how they have been applied within sports feminism, and feminism and disability.

### **Feminism(s) and the understanding of disability**

From a feminist post-structuralist point of view, gender as a social category is a discursive construction. In different discourses varying meanings are attached to what it means to be a woman or man. Likewise, categories like disabled and able-bodied are also assumed to be discursively constituted. Moreover, post-structuralists strive to dissolve dichotomies and to deconstruct the dualistic thinking that separates the world into binary categories such as female/male, culture/nature and disabled/able-bodied (Schildrick, 1997; Shildrick & Price, 1996). Further, feminist post-structuralists pay attention to the intersections between class, gender, ethnic differences and other categories of differences that arguably result in complex differentiation, destabilizing of identities, ongoing uncertainties, and the fracturing of experiences. Feminist post-structural analysis has focused particularly on the body, sexuality and identity, including Foucault's sense of ubiquities power linked to the discourses of pleasure and discipline surveillance techniques and the production of 'docile bodies' (Markula, 1995; Weedon, 1997).

The concept of disability takes much of its meaning from the coordinate concept of able-bodied, as femininity derives its meaning in relationship to masculinity (Smith & Hutchison, 2004). Consequently, there is a considerable body of literature in gender and disability studies concerned with identity formation. Garland-Thomson (1997b, 2004) argues that integrating disability into gender and feminist theories deepens the understanding of how disability operates as an identity category and social concept, and will intensify how we understand what it is to be a human, our relationships with one another, and the experiences of the body. In other words, the combination of these two fields contributes to a deeper understanding of, for instance, gender, autonomy, wholeness, independence, dependence, health, physical appearance, and aesthetics. However, critique has been raised against the fact that disabled

women have been ignored and neglected not only by those concerned by disability but also by those examining women's experiences. One explanation given is that the disabled women reinforce the traditional stereotypes of women being dependent, passive and needy which has not been consistent with feminist scholars' effort to advance a more powerful, competent and appealing female icon (Fawcett, 2000; Morris, 1996; Thomas, 1999).

Overall, since the body constitutes the material core of sport exercise (Hargreaves, 1986), and since sport as a social practice shape and modifies social meanings in manner that helps produce advantages and disadvantages for particular individuals and groups, it is clear that Foucauldian influenced forms of feminist post-structuralism have dominated pedagogical and sociological studies of sport and exercise (Markula & Pringle, 2006). In particular, post-structuralist approaches to sport have challenged the modernist tendency to speak in one unified voice about women (Hargreaves, 2004). However, there are relatively few studies that combine gender and disability studies, even though gender research and disability scholarship have much in common. For instance, issues of the body, social and cultural hierarchy, identity, discrimination and inequality, representation, and political activism are central to both fields (Barron, 2004; Guthrie & Castelnovo, 2001; Hargreaves, 2000a, 2004; Kristiansen & Traustadóttir, 2004; Meekosha, 1998; Thomas, 1999).

In this section I have brought light on some of the features of a post-structural approach and discussed alternative ways of analyzing disability and gender. Finally, I think it is important to keep in mind that the understanding and explanation of gender, disability and sport in Western culture of today might not be significant in other cultural or historical contexts.

## Knowledge gaps in previous research

In the light of the suggestions found in the literature, there appears to be a knowledge gap in the relationships between gender and disability and how they play out in sport. Apparently, sport is, as I see it, an excellent context in which to investigate the contradictions and complexities that surround disabled men and women. By opening up the gap between each field this dissertation intends to initiate a deeper conversation across the borders. Clearly, it seems like power, or lack of it, is the issue faced in the discussions about disabled athletes' participation in sport. As an attempt to fill the theoretical gap, this dissertation focuses on some of the key findings of previous studies.

These findings can be summarized by the following three points:

- One, it seems like gender and ability play important roles within sport as a social practice.
- Two, on the one hand disabled women and men seem to be oppressed by disabling barriers in society whereas sport has the potency to empower them. On the other hand, the able-bodied ideal seems to be so dominant in sport that it is not only reproduced by the sports media, but also by the wheelchair athletes themselves.
- Three, gender seems to be a neglected aspect within disability sport studies. In a similar way, disability has been a neglected aspect within gender studies.

Against this background, this dissertation has a particular orientation that sets it apart from other publications since it focuses upon the representation of the gendered and (dis-)abled being within the elite sport context. Furthermore, this dissertation sets out to examine the terminology used in printed media to describe wheelchair racers and the language used to portray their performance. Further, it spotlights the construction of identities.



### III. METHODS

Before I move on to a more detailed description of the implementations of each study and the methodological adjustments made, I will exemplify how the representation of disabled people can be understood from a discourse analytic view. The example is based on the tale of the fiction figure Superman, portrayed by the American actor Christopher Reeve.

In short, the storyline is that the superman saved the world from evil and made the heart beat among young women, particularly the beautiful female journalist Lois Lane with whom he was secretly in love. All in all, superman exemplifies every characteristic features of manhood and masculinity. He represents intelligence, strength, braveness, whiteness, the middle class, able-bodiedness and heterosexuality. Nevertheless, even though Christopher Reeve was immortal as superman he was not in real life. In May 1995, Reeve was paralyzed from the neck and down in a sport accident, and confined to a respirator and a motorized wheelchair for the rest of his life. The traumatic injury was the result of one moment in Christopher Reeve's life that propelled him from the world of able-bodied into the world of disabled, from the position of superior into the position of subordination within the social context of gender and ability. In this scenario, he was subjected to a radical disabling transformation which exposes the gap between people with impairments and their representation. Because, and despite the accident, he was still a husband, father, sportsman and actor, or was he? Christopher Reeve, in the role as superman, previously the ideal of maleness, braveness and ability was from the day the accident took place depicted in media as 'the disabled man' of the superwoman, namely his wife, Dana Mosini Reeve.

In sum, throughout history people have created knowledge about humans and such knowledge has shaped the experience of being human. The above example of superman illustrates the mechanisms of power that underpin the complex processes of becoming an able and gendered being. It demonstrates how representation attaches meanings to the body and how it can be culturally and socially transformed from powerful, strong and independent to be marked out as un-powered, weak and dependent. Further, based on expectations and taken-for-granted meanings about how a human being should look and act, the able body of superman was validated and affirmed while the disabled body was not. In addition, this example illustrates how people are classified and disciplined by social processes that they have little direct control over. My sketch of Christopher Reeve, in an attempt to help understand how certain ideas are put into practice and used to regulate particular ways of knowing

oneself and others, leads into the next section in which I discuss in more detail the decision to focus on representations of wheelchair athletes.

## The study

Sport is more than just being physically active, staying fit or winning the game. Sport can also be a window into power relations, gender and identity constructions, opportunities, and constrains within a specific social and cultural context (Creedon, 1994; Whannel, 2002). The fact that sport appears to be outside the boundaries of 'real' life, and thus outside 'real' social relations, heightens its power in constructing an extreme notion of social order as a hierarchy based on difference (Key, 2003). As Markula and Pringle (2006) assert, sport as a social and cultural institution mirrors rituals and mainstream values of the societies in which they are developed. All representations of reality can therefore be considered as carrying their share of socially constructed meanings. Consequently, sport is not outside real life and neither is wheelchair racing in which the gender-, sport- and disability discourses meet. Some of the important questions of relevance to this study are: if these discourses are in conflict with each other? if they are colliding in an antagonistic relationship to one another? and if they are articulated together in particular ways? In this dissertation I claim that discourse analysis can give answers to the above questions and also provide knowledge of how discourse is produced and regulated within texts and additionally, the social consequences or effects of such processes.

## Context and social setting

Not long ago disabled athletes were excluded from sport and those included were those closest to the able-bodied ideals. Typically, these were white males with lower spinal cord injuries who competed in wheelchairs (DePauw, 1997a: 421). Wheelchair racing is still dominated by men since 80 percent of individuals with spinal cord injuries are men (Smart, 2001). This means that young men with spinal cord injuries constitute the largest recruiting base for wheelchair sports (DePauw & Gaveron, 2005). However, wheelchair racing is not only about how the athletes' bodies are used, but also about the types of bodies the athletes develop over time or in a particular context (Sparkes & Smith, 2007). Additionally, the racing-chair, designed to give the athlete optimal condition to perform at elite level, signifies a body transformation which transfers a person into a world of speed, skill and physical perfection (Hargreaves, 2000a). Against this background, wheelchair racing is about disciplining the body within a masculine practice, to become as fast, fit and as strong as possible. In other words, wheelchair racing seems to have many of the characteristic features commonly associated with masculinity and physicality.

In contrast to this ‘malestream’ picture of wheelchair racing, some of the most famous and successful wheelchair racers are women. Apart from the Swedish racer, Madelene Nordlund mentioned in the prologue, the British racer Tanni Grey-Thompson, the Australian racer Louise Sauvage and the Canadian racer Chantal Petitclerc are all examples of successful female wheelchair racers. Besides the fact that they have been successful in their sport and have high media profiles they have, as I see it, also transgressed the border between able and disabled. For example, the British racer Tanni Grey-Thomson is a television presenter in Wales and was made a Dame of the British Empire in 2005. Chantal Petitclerc is a TV host in Québec and a well-known sport celebrity in Canada, and the Australian racer, Louise Sauvage has won an extraordinary number of awards including the 1999 Australian Female Athlete of the Year award.

### **Selection of research topic – the object of research**

In this dissertation the social context of wheelchair racing has been applied as a backdrop against which the identity constructions and media representations of wheelchair racers have been analyzed. Since the media representations and the identity constructions of wheelchair racers were the focus of this study, I decided to collect data from interviews with male and female racers and to analyze the sports media. I conducted an interview study with five female wheelchair racers who participated in the Australian national team in wheelchair racing, 2000. Then I analyzed Swedish sports media texts from the Paralympics in Sydney, 2000. Finally, I conducted an interview study with four female and five male athletes from Sweden who had all competed at international level in wheelchair racing (see the summary of the articles in section IV).

The reason for choosing to undertake a discourse analysis of interview data and sports media texts arose out of my interest in trying to understand and explain power relations, and ‘existing’ notions and expectations of what it means to be able-bodied and disabled, masculine and feminine, and what ‘real’ sport is and should be about and what such representations stand for. Additionally, I was interested in shedding light on the consequences of the discourse concerning the wheelchair racers identity constructions and on values and meanings in a broader sense at societal level. Considering the relationship between wheelchair racing and society, I suggest that this study has the potential to offer deeper knowledge about stereotypes and taken-for-granted understandings, media representations, language and cultural beliefs about gender, disability and sport and how these operate in different social practices. Such aspects address central problems and issues which face most people in contemporary society, not only disabled athletes.

### Personal experiences

From my personal viewpoint, my knowledge and experience of the sporting and gendered body was challenged when I became involved in wheelchair racing as an able-bodied athlete. Being in this field gave me insights into the world of wheelchair racing and widened my understanding of what ability in sport means. Based on my experiences I would argue that, being impaired or not, one must go through the same phases to become an athlete. This means that one has to find out how the equipment works, develop muscles strength, coordination, duration, technique, and so forth. Further, one has to learn all the sport specific rules and regulations as well as valid social and cultural codes to be able to interact with the other wheelchair athletes. Even though wheelchair racing is, like in most sports, about strength, energy and body control, it would be deceiving to deny that experiences of impairment in terms of struggle for independence in daily life and in some cases against illness and pain are central to many people with impairments. Such circumstances may also have a negative impact on the athlete's training possibilities and results. Consequently, when I entered the realm of wheelchair racing I did not share such experiences as my knowledge and understanding were exclusively based on being a female 'able-bodied' wheelchair athlete.

### Analytic framework – guideline of discourse analysis

My theoretical and methodological approach can broadly be described as a combination of feminist post-structuralism, qualitative research and discourse analysis. This means that I have selected and brought together different but closely related concepts and terms, and drawn on the work of a number of social theorists with whom I have found it fruitful to conduct a dialogue when working with my own guidelines of discourse analysis (see p. 36). All of these social theorists, however, raise questions about language and discourse.

First, I discuss how I located the gender-, sport- and disability discourses within previous research. Then, I move on to explain how I systematically interpreted and analyzed sports media texts and interview transcriptions with my located discourses in mind. Additionally, as part of this stage of the process I simultaneously searched for combinations of discourses as well as new discourses. My position here is based on the assumption that social relations, cultural values and social identities are not isolated and neither are discourses.

Common for all of my studies, is, that they deal with the complex interaction of discourses about gender, disability and sport and illustrate how these operate within the context of wheelchair racing. Article I: *Gender and disability – some reflections on recent sports science research* gives the base of scientific statements and concepts that form the knowledge of gender, sport and

disability. Article II: *“I try to be as athletic like, forget the other side of me”- Constructions of elite female wheelchair athletes’ identities*, illuminates and gives answer to how female wheelchair racers at the top level construct and practice their identities. Article III: *The discourse of able-ism – gendered wheelchair athletes in the Swedish sports media* sheds light on the media representations of wheelchair racers. Finally, Article IV: *“I do not compete in disability”: How wheelchair athletes challenge the discourse of able-ism through action and resistance* focuses on the construction of identities among both male and female wheelchair athletes.

### **Selection and organization of previous research**

According to Edley (2001), there has been a tradition within the social sciences to make a distinction between discourse and social practice. In this dissertation these have been treated as interchangeable. Thus, as has been explained previously, discourse is considered to be more than just social practices. It also includes forms of representations and relations of power. Subsequently, in my struggle to trace the discursive formation of gender, disability and sport I had to examine the historical development of the way these social practices, power relations and representations had been understood and how certain ideas had been put into practice and used to regulate particular ways of knowing one’s self and others. To accomplish this I had to locate and identify statements and concepts that defined general knowledge of gender, disability and sport.

At the beginning of my project, I was afraid that there would be insufficient literature available because the research questions were tightly focused and that the area of gender sport and disability is relatively new and therefore unexplored terrain. However, this was not the case. A search through the library databases ERIC, Physical Education Index and Sport Discus (EBSCO) demonstrated an extensive amount of appropriate information. In this case the selection of information sources was limited to books, peer-reviewed journals and doctoral dissertations. Further, these in their turn provided me with further useful sources in their references section and bibliography. When searching for relevant sources I tried to be as systematic as possible, but I also looked out for literature that could be uncovered by accident, for instance recommended by my supervisors or colleagues. At the end of my searching I had an overview of the nature of existing research on socialization and identity, the history of disability studies, gender aspects on disability and on sport, media representations of athletes with impairments and different theoretical and methodological approaches to investigate such issues. Towards the end of my literature review, I came across the same references again and again when I read new articles. This indicated that I had covered the main literature sufficiently. Once I had identified the literature, I then searched for gaps in the research which helped me to narrow down and specify my own research questions.

At this stage of research, I needed appropriate tools to analyze the complex and sometimes contradictory interactions between different discourses. As Fairclough (2003: 16) argues, what we are able to see of the actuality of a text depends upon the perspective from which we approach it, including the particular social issues in focus and theory we draw upon. Once I had taken the decision to approach the field from a feminist post-structuralist perspective using discourse analysis as my tool, I started to re-read the texts with these glasses on, looking out for characteristic features of dominating discourses.

### **Locating and identifying social practices – discourses within previous research**

In the process of locating and identifying the discourses involved, I was thinking of discourses as the ways that a topic or an issue was described through previous research. When I was re-reading the literature my intention was to study how knowledge and meanings about gender, sport and disability were temporarily fixed and expressed within written text. The texts were not interpreted as reflections of individual standpoints, interests, intentions or what the authors aimed to mediate to the readers. I was looking for frequently repeated themes and expressions which indicated dominating notions and taken-for-granted truths about human beings and social life. These various different and sometimes contradictory ways to textualize a topic or issue came together to gradually build up a picture of representation of a certain issue or topic. This 'picture' was what I located and identified as a discourse. In other terms, I was searching for ideas, concepts, and categorizations articulated in written texts which I presumed shaped the way people categorized phenomenon for instance such as feminine, masculine, disabled, able-bodied, strong, weak, and so on.

Within the process of locating and identifying discourses within previous research I created the following guidelines:

- a) Are there any statements, concepts or repeated ways of acting, ways of representing and ways of being that could be identified as discourse?
- b) Are there any discourses in conflict with each other?
- c) Are there any discourses colliding in an antagonistic relationship to one another?
- d) Are there any discourses articulated together in particular ways?
- e) How can the consequences/effects of discourses be identified?

The first step a) was the criterion to locate the characteristic features of the discourse. The next three steps (b, c, and d) helped me to investigate the relationship between the located discourses. Ultimately, step e) related the

located discourses in the published literature to the empirical material which is discussed within the summary of each article (see p.45). Additionally, I should make it clear that my framework and the guidelines have been reviewed and revised several times as I have tried to make the analytic process as systematic and transparent as possible, to the reader and to myself.

Guided by the stated questions, my critical re-reading of the literature resulted in the discourses described down below.

#### **The disability discourse**

Critical research about disability has examined the meanings attached to disabled people. One hegemonic political discourse which has been identified, is the personal tragedy perspective which is, among other scholars discussed by Finkelstein (1998), French and Swain (2004) and Swain and Cameron (1999). They assert that the disability political discourse has a tendency to depict disability as a problem or as a personal tragedy. However, being disabled need not be a tragedy to disabled people but the personal tragedy perspective is in fact so prevalent and so infused throughout media representation, language and cultural beliefs, research, policy and professional practice that it cannot be avoided, particularly not by disabled people. Some illustrative examples of the tragedy perspective are that disabled people are looked upon, identified, judged and represented primarily through their bodies. Similarly, the meanings associated with the disabled body are to be imperfect, incomplete and inadequate (Hargreaves, 2000a). Supporting this perspective is the assumption by the medical profession that disabled people wish to be 'normal' or 'physically whole' (Swain & French, 2000). Moreover, mainstream representations of disabled people in media are often influenced by stereotypes of, for instance: the tragic but brave invalid, the sinister cripple, the undesirable 'Other' and the 'supercrip' who has triumphed over tragedy (Schell & Duncan, 1999; Shakespeare, 1999; Thomas & Smith, 2003; Watson, 1998).

Garland-Thomson (1997a: 14), argues that because anyone can become disabled at any time this makes disability more fluid, and perhaps more threatening to those who identify themselves as able-bodied than such seemingly more stable marginal identities as for instance, femaleness and blackness. Although categories such as ethnicity, race and gender based on shared traits that result in community formation, disabled people seldom consider themselves a group. In fact, only the shared experience of being labelled disabled creates commonality. In addition, Garland-Thomson (*ibid*) asserts that disabled people often avoid and stereotype one another in an attempt to normalize their own social identities. This phenomenon has also been discussed by Shildrick and Price (1996).

French and Swain (2004) pinpoint three possible explanations of this personal tragedy perspective of disability. First, it may reflect able-bodied

people's fear of their own mortality. Second, based on dominant social values and ideologies, disability is associated with dependency and abnormality. And finally, the third explanation is based on the fact that able-bodied identity, as other identities, has meaning in relation to and constructs the identity of others. In this manner, the personal tragedy perspective contributes to a possibility for able-bodied people to construct themselves as 'not one of those'.

#### **The gender discourse**

Regarding the gender discourse, there are many different meanings attached to masculinity and femininity. In this context, gender is defined as identities for men and women that come into being in relationship to one another. In that sense, femininity cannot be understood separately from masculinity. Cultural meanings help produce what is to be a man or a woman that is, cultural gendered social beings (Smith & Hutchison, 2004; Whannel, 2007). With regard to the gender discourse, cultural codes of the body, dress and behaviour such as sexuality and attractiveness signify gender and, consequently, characteristic features of femininity and masculinity (Weedon, 2004). For instance, masculinity has tended to be defined through notions of strength, rationality, self-reliance, potency, and action (Kimmel, 2000; Robertson, 2004). Meanings associated with femininity are often characterized by passivity and fragility, beauty, self-sacrifice and responsiveness to others' needs (Creedon, 1994; Garland-Thomson, 1997a, 1997b, 2004).

#### **The sport discourse**

Finally, the sport discourse has been critically scrutinized in many different settings. Within competition sports, which have relevance to the wheelchair racing context, rules, regulations and control help to produce a multitude of bodies (e.g. fast, slow, strong, weak, fit, unfit, beautiful, powerful, feminine and masculine). In particular, the able body is incorporated with strength, grace, power or endurance to perform at highest level and sculptured to break records. Some of the characteristic features of the sport discourse can be illustrated with the meanings associated with competition, victory, physicality, athleticism, aggressiveness, toughness, heroism and masculinity (Duncan, 2006; Giulianotti, 2005). Further, the production of sporting bodies is controlled during a sport event by, for instance, the audience and the media. In fact, doing sport is always doing gender; it always presents itself as male or female with more or less demonstrative masculinity and femininity (Hall, 1996; Knight & Giuliano, 2003; Whannel, 2002; Wright, 2000). According to Russell (2007) it should be noted that women within sport also contribute to the exclusion of women who do not fit their ideal of what it is to be a 'real' sportswoman. The messages produced through media portray idealized notions of normality in which 'others' including disabled people are seen as deficient in some way (Fitzgerald

& Jobling, 2004: 75). When regarding female athletes, the media has a tendency to trivialize them by devoting a disproportionately smaller amount of time to their performances as well as by highlighting their physical attractiveness (Olofsson, 2002).

Traditionally, sport and exercise are sites where the objectification of the body has been promoted. In fact, sport as a social and cultural institution mirrors rituals and mainstream values of the societies in which they are developed (Markula & Pringle, 2006). The athletes and teams become ambassadors of their hometown or nation. In addition, their games and performance become symbolic representations of personal and societal struggles for such things as fairness, ambitiousness, economical gain and honour. To be a successful athlete is comparable to being a good society member. In that manner, society shape sport and reciprocally, sport shapes society (Duncan & Hasbrook, 2002).

### **Some comments on the located discourses**

Gender, sport and disability have been considered as three discourses operating in the same context, namely wheelchair racing, both in conflict and in agreement with one another. Although I have presented these three discourses as distinct, it will already be apparent that they are implicated in one another and shade together. Accordingly, these descriptions represent stereotypical pictures and the dominant features of each discourse. However, dominating notions of sport, gender and ability are not absolutes, nor pre-given qualities but function as norms and practices of regulation and control. It is against such discursive constructions that we measure and value ourselves and others as either normal or deviant.

Discourses are, as has already been argued, not 'closed systems' (Hekman, 1990) and therefore thinking and acting differently is always possible. For instance, the discourses I have described may very well be slightly differently described in other practices because discourse is assumed to be specific to particular circumstances (Philips & Jørgensen, 2002; Taylor, 2001). This is also significant for my study were there are minor differences in the description of the gender, disability and sport discourse in each article. As Kristeva (1986) asserts, any text is explicitly or implicitly 'in dialogue with' other texts, reaching to, drawing in, and transforming each other. This means that if we assume that we are constantly seeking to extend and improve our knowledge of texts we have to accept that our categories are always provisional and open to change.

However, as the core meaning of each discourse has been 'proven' to be historically and socially stable they are considered to be representative and useful as a tool within this particular theoretical and methodological framework. The intention has been to expose the processes through which discourses are produced, but also to set up the ways that those discourses are

practiced, supported and challenged by the wheelchair athletes themselves or by the sports media. Accordingly, examples of how these discourses are articulated within the context of wheelchair racing will be given and discussed more fully in section IV (summary of the articles).

### **Identifying and analyzing social practices – discourses within empirical material**

When I had located the discourses within previous research I moved on to the second step of my research process, namely, to conduct the empirical studies. As has already been mentioned, my empirical data included face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with male and female wheelchair racers and Swedish sports media texts from the Paralympics in Sydney, 2000. The located discourses had two main functions. Firstly, it gave me ideas of relevant themes to investigate and to ask questions about. Secondly, it helped me with the process of organizing, interpreting and analyzing the collected data.

To use discourse analysis as a theoretical and methodological concept means that the empirical data has to be translated in order to extract meanings. Repeated re-reading is, therefore an important part of the process of analyzing empirical data. This gives what Carabine (2001) describes, the researcher an overall ‘feel’ of the data, which makes it possible to identify various themes, categories, representations in, and objects of the discourse. Consequently, in articles II, III and IV, the empirical data were analyzed and understood in relation to the discourses in use. My assumption was based on the understanding that there is no universal gender, disability or sport discourse; rather there are several different unwritten rules that shape social practices in the location of disability sport and wheelchair racing. How and in what way the media texts and interview transcriptions drew on the gender, sport and disability discourses formed the core of my analysis and discussion. Parallel to this I also looked for ‘new’ discourses to emerge within the texts.

Additionally, the aim has not been to claim experiences of wheelchair racing from the disabled athlete’s viewpoint, but rather to contribute to a mediation and theorization of such knowledge and experiences. In this matter, my viewpoint may contribute to a theoretical knowledge about how power operates in wheelchair racing, through different discourses and how power inserts itself through the way the wheelchair racers construct and manage their identities as sportsmen and sportswomen. Within discourse analysis the concept of representation (including identity construction) is the tool by which the process and condition of being a person is understood. The subject has therefore not been considered as autonomous but determined by discourses. That is, how the wheelchair racers were constituted as subjects through social processes that bring them into beings as subjects for themselves and others. Consequently, my analysis is based on the assumption that it is the discourse, not the subject,

which produces knowledge (Hall, 2001). To accomplish this, the interview technique (face-to-face semi-structured interviews) used in articles II and IV allowed the interviewees to reveal their lived experiences, their subjective understandings of gender and wheelchair racing, and the discursive resources used in constructing these understandings. Based on the assumption that certain discourses are dominant, powerful and influential and others relatively marginal, the language available to people enables and constrain not only their expression of certain ideas but also what they do (Fairclough, 2001; Taylor, 2001). In relation to this study it means that I have investigated how the discourses are related to each other, i.e., tried to get a sense of how they are operating within the social practice of wheelchair racing. Consequently, I have tried to identify *what* rather than *who* oppresses disabled people. Accordingly, I have also been looking at what actually goes on in specific texts and interactions, for example, in the sports media analysis in article III.

## The role of the researcher

Social research is an interactive process, shaped by the researcher's personal history, biography, gender social class, race and ethnicity. In that sense, science can never be value free or objective (Taylor, 2001). Researchers tell stories about the phenomena they have studied, and so do I. This means that I do not believe that the researcher can be a 'fly on the wall' who see things as they really are. Consequently, my responsibility as a researcher is to make the result as transparent as possible so it can be validated by the reader rather than give the illusion of my position as objective and neutral. However, full transparency is not possible to achieve; if it were it would be almost the same as absolute knowledge that is rejected in social constructionist location (ibid). What I mean is that discourse analytic research, such as this, produces knowledge which contributes to reality creation, but which will only be one among many representations of the world. Although, this does not mean that we cannot make claims and judgments about this reality – indeed, we cannot avoid doing so but all claims should be open to discussion (Philips & Jørgensen, 2002).

Fairclough (2003) argues that reality (the potential, the actual) cannot be reduced to our knowledge of reality, which is contingent, shifting and partial. Textual analysis is also inevitably selective: in any analysis, we choose to ask certain questions about social events and texts, and not other possible questions. The general point is that there are always particular motivations for choosing to ask certain questions about texts and not others. The reason why, is that texts have social, political, cognitive, moral and material consequences and effects, and that it is vital to understand these consequences and effects if we are to raise moral and political questions about contemporary societies. Some readers may be concerned about the 'objectivity' of an approach to text analysis based on

motivations. According to Fairclough (2001, 2003) this is not a problem. On the contrary, he argues that there is no such thing as an 'objective' analysis of a text, if by that we mean an analysis which simply describes what is 'there' in the text without being 'biased' by the 'subjectivity' of the analyst. Our ability to know what is 'there' is inevitably limited and partial. Consequently, there is no objective reality to check the researcher's findings against (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Taylor, 2001). As Wetherell (2001), explains:

*In discourse research, decisions about the truth and falsity of descriptions are typically suspended. Discourse analysts are much more interested in studying the process of construction itself, how 'truths' emerge, how social realities and identities are built and the consequences of these, than working out what 'really happened' (Wetherell, 2001: 16).*

My commitment to the research presented in this dissertation relates to my committed engagement with issues of social exclusion and marginalization in sport. The purpose has, from the very beginning, been to give a voice to the women and men who have been under investigation by theorizing their experiences. From my viewpoint, discursive change takes place when discursive elements are articulated in new ways. I also underline that the understandings and explanations of disabled people themselves are central and that an academic perspective such as the one presented in this dissertation only offers limited insights and only one representation among many.

Further more, I have tried to reflect on my own role as a researcher, in the process of knowledge production which also is socially and culturally construed. I am well aware of the classical relation of authority between me as a researcher and the people under study. Basically, as I am the one who have set up the project and has more information about it than the participants it also includes the fact that I am in a powerful position within the academic discourse. Therefore, in the interview process with wheelchair racers presented in article II and IV, I tried to avoid positioning myself as sovereign authority with privileged access to truth. However, equality between the researcher and the interviewee is difficult to establish, in particular in the face-to-face interview situation. After all, it is the researcher who has taken the initiative to conduct the conversation, who has chosen the topic and who asks the questions. As far as it has been possible I have tried to place the athletes themselves in the centre.

## Ethical considerations

As research is important and necessary to individuals and the development of the society, it must examine essential issues and maintain a high quality. This requirement means that available knowledge will be more profound and

methods will be improved. Moreover, the researcher must take responsibility for the humans he or she performs research on and the information collected about them. It is fundamental that research be approved only if it can be conducted with respect for human worth, and that human rights and basic freedoms are considered at all times through ethical examination. Naturally, researchers' primary responsibilities are always to their informants, interviewees and research participants. Further, participants should always be guaranteed confidentiality. These procedures are accepted among qualitative researchers (see Gratton & Jones, 2004; Kvale, 1996).

This research presented in this dissertation has been organized to conform to the requirements of the Vetenskapsrådets regler och riktlinjer för forskning (2006). The guidelines are not intended to replace the researcher's own appraisal or responsibility but rather to serve as the basis of the researcher's own reflections and insights into his or her responsibilities. In addition, an ongoing discussion about ethical adjustments has taken place throughout the entire research process. Sometimes questions and decisions were discussed in the PhD student seminar group, other times with my academic supervisors who both have extensive experience of qualitative research. In regard to the Vetenskapsrådets regler och riktlinjer för forskning (ibid) the fundamental individual protection requirements have been concretized into four general primary requirements for research. These are: the information-, approval-, confidentiality-, and the right of use requirements.

The participants in the two interview studies were informed about the study, and the researcher's institutional connection. Further, information was given to them making it clear that the result was planned to be presented in research articles and as a part of my dissertation. It was made clear that the participants were free to terminate an interview at any time without having to provide a reason for doing so. Additionally, all the interviews were conducted by myself, the researcher, and the responses were recorded using a digital-recorder and transcribed by me. At the end of the interview the interviewees were allowed to add anything they believed to be of importance. After the interviews were transcribed, the interviewees had the opportunity to review the transcripts and make corrections or additions. In regard to the sports media text analysis (see article III) no requirements of approval was made since this information was considered to be of public character.

The participants' real names have not been used in this study. However, elite wheelchair racers are a small group of sportsmen and sportswomen and as such they are in a vulnerable position. In particular, the risk of internal identification was taken into consideration. Even though I am well aware of the fact that dissertations rarely become bestsellers, and that academic publications are not widely read, my writing will, in one way or another, impact on peoples' understanding of wheelchair racers. Further, in a few cases information has

been removed from transcripts. Information was, for example, removed when one of the interviewees had given information about another wheelchair racer involved in the study that may be readily identifiable to others. It was removed to avoid the risk of harm or distress to the participants. These considerations have been balanced against the fact that the interview was an occasion when the wheelchair racers had an opportunity to verbalize their experiences and make their voices heard.

## IV. SUMMARY OF THE ARTICLES

In this section I will describe each of the four studies and comment on the results and the analytic process. Every subsection starts with a short summary of the study, before I point to some of the findings and finally, I describe the theoretical and methodological process behind each article. By investigating how the gender, sport and disability discourses influence and operate within the context of wheelchair racing I intend to illustrate the cumulatively of previous findings.

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### Article I, Gender and disability – some reflections on recent sports science research

This article offers a critical view on sports science research on gender and disability. The intention was to scrutinize research produced during the decade 1997 to 2007 and compare the results with a similar study conducted by Kolkka and Williams (1997). It aimed to examine if the production of sports science research during this period had resulted in new knowledge and if it contained any contradictions, gaps or needs for further investigation.

The result illustrates that sport is interpreted and understood as an arena in which social values are reflected and where dominating notions and social injustice are reproduced and also challenged. Currently, qualitative studies based on social science approaches complement previous quantitative, often medical studies. For instance, qualitative studies have contributed to deeper knowledge and understanding of the significance of sport considering identity constructions in relation to gender, disability and media representations of male and female athletes with impairments. Moreover, previous research points to the fact that sports media still reinforce rather than challenge negative stereotypes of disability. This gives the impression that disability sport is about disability and exceptionally little about sport. Further, it seems to be more difficult for disabled women than for disabled men and able-bodied women to be socialized into sport. According to this overview, disabled women's possibility to identify with sport is complicated because sport is characterized by masculine ideals such as aggressiveness, dominance and self-reliance. Such ideals

not only affect disabled women's identity constructions, they also reduce the possibility of alternative identity constructions among disabled men.

On the one hand, previous research indicates that disabled women have difficulties in understanding themselves as participating subjects within the sport context and that they have few socialization agents. On the other hand, previous research gives examples of how disabled women through history have searched for challenges and opportunities to develop their sport specific skills and achievements. In fact, several studies indicate that women, like men, experience sport as something positive in relation to self-reliance, physical skills and performance. However, the combination of a relative low number of disabled sportswomen and the silence that surround women's sport performance and achievements in historical texts and sports media give the impression that disabled sportswomen do not take sport seriously. Disabled sportswomen's contributions to sport as a social institution have therefore not been thoroughly investigated. Further, there is also a need of research that focuses on disabled men's and women's knowledge and experiences of sport. This study found that most international journal articles are published by researchers with English as their first language. Research based on arguments, knowledge and experiences from other parts of the world, for instance, Scandinavia, are of importance to give a broader picture of disability, sport and gender which still are a relative unexplored terrain.

For the data collection, mainly peer-reviewed journal articles focusing on disability sport and gender from a social scientists viewpoint were selected. The key words: *disability sport*, *disabled athletes*, *wheelchair racers*, *wheelchair athletes* in combination with *gender* resulted in altogether 99 articles with different scientific approaches. A reading of the articles revealed that the social practice of gender, sport and disability were 'spoken of' in a number of ways, for example: Media coverage of elite athletes with impairments, wheelchair athletes discussing sports media, representation of disabled athletes in sports media, socialization into wheelchair sports, sport and physical activity among disabled girls and women, meaning of sport to adults with impairments and negotiating identities through disability sport. Out of these 99 articles I selected 28 articles which focused on gender aspects on disability sports from a social scientist perspective. The articles were critically re-read, finally evaluated and organized into four main themes; 1) Sport and identity, 2) Integration and socialisation, 3) Media representation of disabled athletes and finally, 4) The meanings of and opportunities in sport. Of note here is that these articles were analyzed as one textual entity, in which I presumed to discern the contours of the stated themes. The findings and conclusions in each article were then discussed in relation to whether the field had been expanded with new knowledge, if there were any contradictions, gaps or needs for complementary research in comparison with the result of Kolkka and William's (1997) study.

Published as:

Wickman, K.(2007a). *Genus och funktionshinder: Några nedslag i forskningen kring handikappidrott*. Available online at:  
<http://www.idrottsforum.org/articles/wickman/wickman070516.html> (accessed 21 February 2007).

## Article II, "I try to be as athletic like, forget the other side of me" – Construction of Elite Female Wheelchair Athletes' Identities

Based on one-to-one semi-structured interviews this study focused on the identity constructions of five elite female wheelchair athletes, who competed in the Paralympics 2000. The primary focus of the study was the symbolic and material interaction between the female athletes and society (in particular the elite sport environment) and the process through which the women construct meaning from their experiences. The elite sport environment in focus in this study is that which emerges in the meaning-giving process of interaction between these five athletes, their individual milieu, and the wider society. This study highlighted factors which influenced whether or not these athletes coped with the 'media picture' of themselves, how identity and elite sports were related, how these women managed success and obstacles, and how they first got into the sport. In this study the Paralympics was applied as a backdrop against which the athletes' experiences and knowledge were contemplated.

According to these female wheelchair athletes their physical impairment has given them access to sport as a social practice which logically at least does not a priori define them as deviant. However, these athletes competed in a sport which initially was created with disability as its starting-point. According to the interviewees' experiences, people in general did not understand the difference between a racing-chair and a standard wheelchair. They often asked questions about the athletes' impairments rather than about their sport performances and achievements. For such reasons, these athletes had mixed feelings of resistance and responsibility to provide answers to such questions, in particular, when questions were felt to be about private, rather than professional matters. Apart from such experiences, sport had given them the opportunity to travel, to establish social contacts with other athletes, trainers and coaches and to construct themselves as athletes at the elite level. What was obvious in these women's stories was that they could not be perceived as passive objects unable to affect their own lives. Rather they seemed to be well aware of the logic of the discursive game and thereby manifest their independency through action and resistance. Further, they had been able to counteract people's focus on the disability by asserting their abilities as wheelchair racers. Overall the research

suggested that the interviewees saw themselves primarily as athletes, rather than as female athletes or disabled athletes.

The process of selecting the topic and sources of data gradually emerged from the literature review that I conducted at the onset of the study. The process of selecting relevant literature was similar to the one described in article I. The selection was made with help of databases and key words such as: *wheelchair sports, wheelchair racing, disability and sport, gender and disability, disabled athletes, sports for disabled, disability sports*. Then I began to read, re-read, and read again. I did this to get a 'sense' of what the texts were about and what knowledge they produced and what power relations they explored and mediated. Further, I was looking for contradictions to and coherences with the discourses identified in previous research. For instance, it became clear to me how complex, over-determined and loaded the concept of disability was with notions and expectations which implicitly and explicitly affect the lives of those who were labelled disabled.

Later, I searched for examples of how the social practices, power relations and forms of representations of gender, sport and disability were drawn upon and how they worked out together within previous research texts. A re-reading of the literature revealed that gender aspects of sport and disability were 'spoken of' in a number of ways. However, one gap found in previous research was that disabled people had very little opportunity to portray their own experiences in general culture (Hargreaves, 2000a). As gender and sport were two of my core issues I decided to focus on identity constructions of elite female wheelchair athletes by interviewing some of the top elite athletes participating in the Paralympics. Since I was 'familiar' with the local context of wheelchair racing it was relatively easy for me to get in contact with the interviewees. As in article I, the assumption was made that social practices or concepts such as gender, sport and disability correspond to discursive constructions, i.e. that these were interchangeable.

I, then, conducted the interviews. These were transcribed into text files and analyzed. During the analysis process, I re-read the texts several times to find out how the gender-, sport- and disability discourses appeared within the stories told by the interviewees and whether they reproduced, challenged or reconstructed them. Further, I tried to identify how their identities as elite female wheelchair athletes could be understood and described. I was also interested in finding out more about the interviewees' experiences of being positioned by others. Additionally, throughout the analysis process there was an interaction between theory and empirical data. This meant that the discourses conceptualized from previous research were modified during the analysis process of the interview texts. Furthermore, at this stage of my research I came to realize how dominant the influence of sport specific norms and standards were within what I called 'the competition discourse'. For this reason, in this

particular study, the term was changed to 'the sport discourse' which I also used in articles III and IV.

Published as:

Wickman, K. (2004). "I try and be as athletic like, forget the other side of me" – constructions of elite female wheelchair athletes' identities. *Kvinder kon & forskning*, 2-3, 22-33.

### Article III, The discourse of able-ism – gendered wheelchair athletes in the Swedish sports media

This study examined Swedish sports media texts about the Paralympic Games in Sydney 2000. It focused on representations of athletes with impairments in general, and male and female wheelchair athletes more specifically. Additionally, the complex and sometimes contradictory intersection of gender, sport and disability is explored.

This study indicated that within the practice of sports media, being a male and an able-bodied athlete is the equivalence of being 'normal'. In contrast, being a female athlete and disabled athlete seemed to be 'deviant' and 'different'. In this manner, the able-bodied and gendered athlete appears as the original, and the disabled athlete, some times described as the non-gendered athlete, seems to represent a copy of the original. Consequently, disabled athletes were constructed as something else than able-bodied athletes. For example, controversy surrounds paragraphs where the media texts downgrade and in doing so, transform the sport specific achievements of the professional athlete to become an image of a disabled person, able to do sport. In that manner, everything else becomes insignificant. For instance, to win or become last in a particular race has no value compared to overcoming the biggest challenges of all, namely the impairment.

This composition of unwritten regulations produced by the media texts that clearly shape the practice of wheelchair athletes was conceptualized as the discourse of able-ism. The hierarchal relationship between ability and gender was identified; this relationship was reflected strongly in the sports media texts. The exclusion was, however, concealed and neutralized through the regulation and differentiation that the discourse of able-ism legitimated. Further, preferential rights of interpretation of what sport is and should be about were thus given to those who represented and upheld the boundaries of able-ism and thereby reproduced its hegemonic structure.

All in all, the findings indicate that the media texts investigated in this article reinforced the stereotypical perception of disabled athletes as 'second rate performers' and their status as 'outsiders'. Accordingly, male athletes were positioned as gender beings, which was not the case for the female athletes.

Moreover, sport seemed to make it legitimate for the media to comment on the athletes' bodies in fetishistic details, as the athletes were described as sexualized objects but not always as gender beings. However, there were several examples of how the sports media texts resisted inequalities and undermined cultural and social norms, discursively constructed by able-ism. For instance, when the athletes' own voices were quoted in the sports media texts, they appeared as active and powerful subjects and the texts seemed to focus more on sports specific aspects than on impairment and disability. A further example was when the media text suggested that The Paralympics should be a part of the Olympics, which illustrated the meaning making association of equality between (dis-)abled and able-bodied athletes.

The sample included 71 articles reporting on the events of the Sydney Paralympic Games, 2000. The articles were read between October 6 and November 11, 2000. The search criteria that were used to select the sample were formulated by Swedish Sports Organization (SHIF) and limited to articles which only included the combinations of the words: 1) *Swedish participants* and *Disability Olympics* and 2) *Swedish participants* and *Paralympics*. Further, the media selection was based on a specific search list which included: *Suburban and District Press, Prioritized Provincial Press, City Press, Popular Press, Hobby and Leisure, Medical Service and Medicine, Teaching, School and Education*. Similarly to article II, in article III the discourses of gender, sport and disability constituted the frame of interpretation (see pp. 36-39). Further, none of these discourses were considered to stand alone as all three had many elements of compatibility with one another and with other dominant discourses that involve wheelchair racing. In this case the analysis resulted in the following four representations 1) The 'real' athlete, 2) Spare part athlete, 3) The second rate performer, and finally, 4) The fighter. The meaning making associations for each of these four representations depended on the particular discourse drawn on in the media texts.

By distancing my own understanding with help of theory and by re-reading and reanalyzing the texts a new discourse gradually emerged in the data which I named the discourse of able-ism. As I have already mentioned previously, discourses can themselves be seen as combinations of other discourses articulated together in particular ways. According to Fairclough, (2003) this is in fact how new discourses emerge and that is how a new discourse gradually emerged in the media texts which I named the discourse of able-ism. More or less implicitly, in the texts examined, 'being able' involved subject knowledge of how to look, act and behave like a 'real' woman or man. In a similar way to get access to the sport discourse the subject had to be able to look, act and behave as a 'real' sportswoman or sportsman, for instance to be strong, independent, and brave. Finally, being able as a wheelchair racer within the disability discourse was deeply connected to knowledge of how to look, act and behave as

a 'real' disabled, but not to be or become too disabled to be able to do sport. In this manner, my viewpoint was based on the understanding that the discourse of able-ism interacted with all three discourses and for that reason it was added to my analytic framework. With these new findings in mind I conducted the final empirical study which is outlined in the next section.

Presented as:

Wickman, K. (2007b). *The discourse of able-ism – meanings and representations of gendered wheelchair racers in sports media texts*. Paper presented at the 4th EASS Conference, Local Sport in Europe, Münster.

### Article IV, "I do not compete in disability": How wheelchair athletes challenge the discourse of able-ism through action and resistance

Drawing on data from face-to-face semi-structured interviews with five male and four female wheelchair athletes, this study illuminated the meaning-making processes through which athletes constructed and managed their identities. It dealt with the interaction of gender, disability and sport and illustrated how the discourse of able-ism operated among Swedish wheelchair racers.

The main finding was that the discourse of able-ism has considerable impact on the way the athletes understand themselves and the world, and, thus, on their identity constructions. The analysis of interviews showed that the athletes strived to gain access to the discourse of able-ism and, to that end, they reproduced sports-, gender- and disability discourses, and that they strongly resisted being positioned as disabled, but in doing so they sometimes reproduced the discourse of able-ism by positioning other disabled people as deviant. A strong theme running through all of the interviewees' responses was the way they managed their own identities by 'othering', and thereby reconstructing hierarchies, and/or re-positioning themselves in relation to hierarchies that were already part of the sport, gender and disability discourses. The athletes tended to be oppressively disciplined by the normative discourse of able-ism, and they recalled many painful experiences of being treated as 'second rate performers'. However, they subjected themselves to the code and ranking system of elite sport in an attempt to get closer to the discourse of able-ism. For example, in the process of resisting being 'othered', the wheelchair racers 'othered' those whom they regarded as different from themselves (athletes with severe impairments). In fact, those who participated in 'disability sports' were not considered to be 'real' athletes by the interviewees, basically because their performances were not consistent with dominant cultural notions of what sport is and should be about. In this manner, the interviewees did not identify themselves as disabled athletes. Instead, they worked hard at identifying

themselves as wheelchair racers, not disabled and at differentiating themselves from the category of disabled athletes. They, thereby, created hierarchies of disability as disabled athletes (athletes with severe impairments) were 'abjected' and sent to the margin by the interviewees.

However, as the interviewees themselves were by definition 'disabled', this strategy reproduced rather than challenged the able-bodied norm, a strategy which might itself have functioned to keep them in a disempowered position. On the other hand, the disabling processes in wheelchair racing can also liberate to the subject. Although ability is at the centre of sport and physical activity, the interviewees in several cases crossed boundaries in sport and particularly those between ability and disability. For instance, they actively constructed their own bodies and the meanings attached to them from being socially marked as 'disabled' to being controlled, strong and able through participation in sport. In that sense, they claimed access to the sport discourse and demanded that wheelchair racing should be put on an equal footing with other elite sports. Furthermore, the discourse of able-ism seemed to affect the gendering process in many ways. For instance, some of the female wheelchair racers seemed to struggle with both the oppression of being female racers in a male dominated sport and the oppression of being disabled in a sport context dominated by the able-bodied. In general, however, the interviewees seemed to construct themselves as gendered beings in relation to dominating notions and expectations of masculinity and femininity. Finally, this analysis shed light on how particular social notions and expectations of gender and disability in contemporary society are reproduced, but most importantly, resisted and deconstructed among male and female wheelchair racers.

In the earlier study of the meanings and representations of wheelchair racers in sports media texts (Article III), I had noted that the sports media texts constructed the subject of 'disabled athlete', which indirectly reproduced a conception of the 'disabled' as a copy and the 'able-bodied' as the original. The exclusion was, however, concealed and neutralized through the regulation and differentiation that able-ism legitimated. My analytic framework was the gender, sport and disability discourse and the discourse of able-ism. My strategy to interpret and analyze the data was similar to previous studies with the addition of the discourse of able-ism. This interview study confirmed previous findings (in article III) of the influence and dominance of able-ism which efficiently seems to operate through the discourses of gender, sport and disability.

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## V. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

### Re-thinking ability

In this dissertation I have traced the representations of male and female wheelchair athletes as they are constituted by the discourses of gender, sport and disability. First, I have examined how female and male wheelchair racers construct and perform their identities. Secondly, I have analyzed how the media portray wheelchair athletes. Based on the results of the study, I conclude that sport is a key area for the exercise of power and that the social institutions, cultural practices and modes of representations associated with sport are largely influenced by the image of the able (physically whole) and gendered (masculine or feminine) body. This is true both in the sense that sport activity involves the enactment of bodily power, and that the body is a site on which disciplinary power is exercised. Results of the study clearly demonstrate that wheelchair athletes' advances in sport are controlled and curtailed by gender and ability discourses. In particular, the meaning of 'being able' seems to impact on the social lives of wheelchair racers. Although the wheelchair racers have to subject themselves to the discourse of able-ism, they also challenge and reconstruct the values and norms associated with ability through their presence and performance within sport. Additionally, what it means to be 'able' seems to have different meanings depending on the discourses in motion.

In articles III and IV the discourse of able-ism is considered hegemonic. Like any other hegemony it is powerful and through social control it efficiently keeps disabled people out, or in subordinated positions not only from the sport specific realm but from society at large. However, based on the findings in articles II and IV, 'to be able' has different meanings. One can consider oneself as able even though one has been marked out as disabled by the discourse of able-ism. Once accepted as a disabled athlete one then has to contend with the difficulties to be accepted as an athlete by challenging dominating values, norms and standards of the culture in which elite sport operates. Such values are for instance, independency and individualism which stand in sharp contrast to the meanings of dependency with which dis-abled (-not being able to do certain things) are commonly associated. Further, media coverage of disability sport is an illustrative example of how social barriers are reinforced as the media often focuses predominantly upon the athletes' experiences of the disability and/or impairment and gives little or no comment on records, medals, times and the athletes' successes. Although, wheelchair racers are subjected to anomalous classification, medical management, silencing and shame, through sport participation they challenge the assumptions that underlie these negative images

to reclaim their own high skilled and performing bodies. Articles II and IV illustrate how the wheelchair racers seek to assert the value of their own presence in the world and to transform rather than fit into the excluding institution of sport.

## Wheelchair racing and power relations

How can Foucault's concept of power be understood in the wheelchair racing context? To become a wheelchair racer one has to be classified and categorized as disabled to get access to the social practice of competitive sports. Those who aim at participating in the Paralympics, the equivalence to The Olympics, have to subject themselves to the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) Athletics Classification Rules. The IPC divides wheelchair racers into two subgroups. In the first group, athletes with spinal cord injuries or spinal cord conditions, athletes with amputations, athletes with other musculoskeletal impairments, congenital anomalies and nerve lesions who meet the sport specific minimum impairment levels are included. In the second group athletes with cerebral palsy, traumatic brain injury or stroke are included. Thus, to become a wheelchair racer the athlete has to accept and adjust themselves to a system which observes and diagnoses in every detail their functional abilities such as, muscle power, joint range of movement, spinal deformity, amputation level and congenital limb shortening, spasticity, tendon reflex changes (IPC Athletic Classification Rules, 2006). The classifying system established by the IPC makes the athletes believe and behave as if they have to adjust to these roles in order to be accepted as wheelchair racers. In this manner, the sport arena is not only a place where top elite athletes challenge each other in competition, it is also a context in which power is operating and where the athletes themselves reproduce power techniques and effects.

The athlete has to undergo several tests and observations before being classified. The classifiers assessments turn the wheelchair racers into agents who exercise power on themselves as the IPC guidelines underline:

*Physical examination can be performed by either carrying out a total examination of the athlete or acceptance of what is normal or only examining the area of the injury. When there is available time a complete examination of all athletes is indicated (IPC Athletic Classification Rules, 2006: 6).*

Within the quotation above, the athletes' bodies become a key target and mechanism of power. In this sense, discipline shapes and produces individuals through techniques of surveillance that echo through the societal and individual bodies. This control of the body is twofold; wheelchair racing has the characteristic features of both (able-bodied) sports and disability sports. The

IPC classification system becomes a part of the sporting ritual of wheelchair racing, and the athletes have to subject themselves to the control system in which their bodies and physical constraints are frequently observed, examined and classified. The athletes learn how to accept being judged and ‘naturally’ positioned as subordinated within a wider (able-bodied) sport context.

To reach and succeed at the top elite level athletes (both disabled and able-bodied) are in need of sponsorship. As the sport industry shapes and modifies the social meaning of masculinity, femininity and physicality, it is constantly in need of athletes who are commercially marketable. Consequently, the wheelchair racers who have subjected themselves to the classification system of ‘disabled athletes’ to get access to the elite sport environment then need to transform themselves into ‘saleable’ subjects. This means that, wheelchair racers also have to contend with the difficulties of being accepted as ‘real’ athletes by challenging dominating values, norms and standards of the culture in which elite sport operates.

## **Bending the mainstream definition of ability and gender**

In articles I, II and IV there are also examples of wheelchair racers who have transgressed the boundaries of disability and ability. Article IV, shows that the female wheelchair racers seem to be aware of the assumption that sexuality and reproduction are inappropriate for disabled people and they use different strategies to move beyond those standards. For instance the interviewed racers focused on physical strength and competence and the power and independency that go with it. Another strategy to counteract the label of ‘asexual objectification’ is the example of the female racer who brought her children to a newspaper interview to make clear to the journalist that she was not just a wheelchair racer, but also a mother (article IV).

The types of sport participation opportunities available to women in general are always related to the dominant notions and expectations of femininity in a culture. Female wheelchair racers might have better opportunities to move beyond those stereotypes as disabled women commonly are imagined as the antithesis of the ‘normal’ women. This does not mean that female wheelchair racers do not have to confront the confusing messages of fashion and sport that they should be firm but shapely, fit but sexy, strong but thin. It means that the social pressure on them to live up to these criteria of femininity might not be the same as for able-bodied women.

Characteristic features of wheelchair racing are strength, power and speed – the traits commonly associated with masculinity. Apart for one female wheelchair racer, all the female wheelchair racers in articles II and IV, these masculine constructions do not seem to hinder them from participating in

sport. On the contrary, the female wheelchair racers seem to ignore such gender barriers and the dominating notions of women's as well as disabled people's frailty. The media picture of sport, manhood and masculinity as a unified entity seems to influence the identity constructions of the male wheelchair racers. In article IV, sport participation appears to be a strategy to reconstruct a sprained manhood among some of the athletes. There are several illustrative examples in the analysis of sports media texts (article III) and the interview study (article IV) that confirm how the male wheelchair racers are represented in media and construct their identities in resemblance with masculine images of strength, rationality, self-reliance, potency, and action.

### **Athletes from the margins to the centre**

Even though the process is slow and not so noticeable, wheelchair racers are challenging the gender, sport and disability discourses and establishing new ways of being physically powerful and excellent in the sports' arena. They have shown that exciting track events can be performed by competitors in racing chairs; this is not the sole domain of able-bodied runner. According to the media text analysis in article III, it seems as if these new ways of playing sports are beginning to make sense to many people, while others continue to insist that, athletes with impairments cannot perform 'real' sport and therefore they do not deserve the same support, audience and media attention that traditional able-bodied sports receive. Seeing wheelchair racers as powerful and independent athletes on television and reading about them in newspapers and magazines is important. This is particularly important given that the media most commonly reports on how disabled people struggle with authorities, financial support from the government and limitations in the social and physical environments. All of these elements contribute to a more extensive and visible effect of 'able-ism'.

Wheelchair racing and its high status in disability sports empowers both male and female racers and increases the possibility of seeing and respecting them as 'real' sportsmen and sportswomen. Some critical voices may say that wheelchair racers gain their superior position in disability sports at the cost of those with severe impairments. Such an argument, I think, makes it even more important to critically discuss the dichotomization and categorization of sports for able and disabled athletes. In fact, to seek beyond such categorization can be a useful tool in bringing about changes not only in sport but also in society at large. Currently, sport is conflated with gender and able-ism, and disability sports with disable-ism. Consequently, the potential positive social (and political) benefits of being male and female wheelchair racers are not obvious. However, through their presence and performance in sport, they challenge the social construction of the able-bodied and gendered athlete.

## Methodological challenges

What kind of knowledge has this dissertation produced? This dissertation offers an interpretation of the representations of wheelchair racers which is inevitably partial. A dilemma, which qualitative researchers have to struggle with, is the traditional criteria for evaluating and interpreting research. This is, as noted before, because the researcher's findings and claims cannot be checked against an objective reality. As my understanding is based on the assumption that there are multiple realities, and therefore multiple truths, my intention has been to investigate meaning and significance rather than to give an objective reflection of reality. However, I have found discourse analysis as a fruitful approach that have provided answers to my research questions and as far as it has been possible I have tried to keep the various stages of the research process as transparent as possible.

## Future considerations

Finally, given that there are benefits in examining social and pedagogical issues from multiple theoretical perspectives and that many gender and disability scholars have found discourse analysis effective, I suggest that a turn to Foucault could be adventurous for continued examinations of the discourse of able-ism and the complex articulations between gender, disability and sport. For instance, it would be of interest to investigate what actually happens when the mainstream definitions of sports, gender and ability are challenged and transgressed within team sports where able-bodied and disabled, male and female participants are mixed together.

# EPILOGUE

Madelene, the Swedish wheelchair racer, is still competing. I am looking forward to follow her progress at the Paralympics in Beijing, 2008 where she will compete together with the international elite. Hopefully the media give us the opportunity to follow Madelene's and all the other Paralympians' performances.



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