

## Editorial

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This special issue highlights what, at first glance, may appear to be an unusual subject for sociological inquiry: bodily inabilities. It presents original empirical and theoretical contributions investigating bodily inabilities as an empirical phenomenon and a conceptual challenge, ultimately seeking to understand the sociological importance and implications of the simple fact that (some) bodies cannot do (some) things.

Unlike life science, our aim here is not to comprehend inabilities in order to develop a remedy or solution for them, but rather to make use of the discourses and practices around them in order to add to the sociological understanding of the role of the body in society. Thus, this special issue sets out to advance a broader sociological perspective on bodily in/ability and to map current research in this field.

As an introduction and backdrop for the following articles, in this editorial we will pinpoint the topic of inabilities in society and sociology in general as well as in the sociology of the body more specifically (1). We will then sketch out a brief overview of potential areas of research which reveal themselves if one considers inabilities as an object of sociological inquiry (2). Lastly, we will provide an overview of the articles in this issue (3).

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## 1 Sociology, the body, and bodily in/abilities

### 1.1 Abilities and bodies in sociology and society

Inabilities have yet to attract the attention of (mainstream) sociology. They are (and have long been) overshadowed by the discipline's interest in the functional, in achievement and competence. One of sociology's oldest analytical tools is the distinction between "ascription" and "achievement". Following the modernization narrative, individual achievement increasingly replaces "natural" attributes as the criterion for the distribution of social roles. Prototypes of the older ascribed statuses are embodied differences like age and gender. Modern society, in contrast, recruits its "staff" based on its suitability for functionally specific tasks implying the possession of acquired competence or ability. In this sense, meritocracies emerge as the body loses its significance for social order(-ing).

Against this theoretical backdrop the conspicuous presence of the body in contemporary society may seem striking. On the one hand, critics of modern self-narratives maintain that *ascribed* bodily statuses indeed do still continue to provide the grounds for social selection and exclusion. In the labor market, for example, supposedly natural attributes such as disability and gender still matter because bodies perceived as (potentially) pregnant or disabled are often not deemed fully employable. On the other hand, the body itself seems to be becoming a site of social differentiation by way of *achievement*. Extraordinary bodily abilities are highlighted and celebrated in fields such as sports and performing arts. Further, body-related phenomena formerly taken for granted as mere properties of the body (e.g., health, vigour, fertility, or youthfulness) or as self-regulating biological processes such as sleeping, breathing, or digesting are reframed as (or attributed to) abilities open to refinement, enhancement, and optimization. Indeed, various practices dedicated to monitoring, evaluating, and improving bodily abilities such as self-tracking, coaching, fitness regimes, doping and prosthetics have emerged. As a consequence, individuals are increasingly being held accountable for their bodies and, besides benefitting from the chances of success, they also bear the unequally distributed risk of failure (cf. Duttweiler et al. 2016; Bröckling 2013).

### 1.2 The sociology of the body and bodily in/abilities

This persistence or renaissance of bodies as objects or subjects of achievements and abilities can be found not only in lay but also professional discourse on society. Several prominent approaches in social theory—in our view—revolve around specific kinds of "competent" bodies. Mead builds his theory of self and sociality on the grounds of the primal scene of interacting bodies that are able to produce, see, and hear sounds and gestures. In Bourdieu's work, bodies equipped with "practical sense" feature as operators of social distinction. Other (mainly interactionist or situationist) approaches build more implicitly on bodily abilities: Goffman's pivotal concept of the social situation unfolds around mutually visible and vulnerable bodies, much like Simmel stresses the ability of mutual sensory perception as the basis for social relations. Ethnomethodology's "accomplishments" often rely on compe-

tent members' mastery not only of natural language but also of their bodies. More generally, the impression becomes difficult to escape that an implicit image of the human body pervades social theory; one which implies that bodies are equipped with the capacities, amongst others, of sensory perception, speech, and automobility.

The sociology of the body draws on all these theories. Currently, an influential line of thinking in this field of research is represented by so-called *practice theories* which to a certain degree synthesize the aforementioned approaches. They position bodies as competent participants in social practices and, pivotally, as bearers of incorporated knowledge, they feature as a central locus for the (re-)production of social order.

Situating the body at the center of theoretical inquiry has, on the one hand, resulted in an empirical focus on competent bodies; researchers have tended to study particularly capable, flexible, and resilient bodies and the formation of abilities in sports or performing arts (see recently: Brümmer 2015; Müller 2016), or the production of “knowing”, practiced, and proficient bodies at work in various other fields (for example: O'Connor 2005; Sudnow 2001).

On the other hand, studies have analyzed seemingly unremarkable, everyday bodily processes or qualities, reframing them as remarkable abilities and reconstructing them as the result of complex practical achievements and cultural techniques, e.g. as “art” of walking (Ryave and Schenkein 1974) or as competent “doing” gender (West and Zimmerman 1987).

In both cases, research has focused on reconstructing in rich detail how the observed bodily techniques work. Furthermore, scholars have meticulously examined how the corresponding practical knowledge is acquired and imparted in settings of learning and exercising—how bodies become competent participants in social practices in the first place.

In sum, in the sociology of the body, bodies mostly feature as cap/able entities that are able to learn, practice, and perfect certain abilities. This focus has a blind spot: Whereas much complexity is bestowed upon the dimension of abilities, inabilities are simply contrasted as the absence of abilities and are not appreciated as complex phenomena in their own right.

## 2 Untapped in/abilities: Opportunities for research

We view this conceptual and empirical focus on abilities as an unsatisfactory state of affairs. For one, the focus on abilities as the subject matter of empirical research has left the *notion* of ability itself untouched as a topic of conceptual inquiry (but see Kurtz and Pfadenhauer 2010's sociology of *competencies* and Schillmeier 2007's concept of *dis/abling practices*). In addition, a closer look at the flipside of bodily ability reveals thus far untapped opportunities for research from which sociology as a whole would benefit.

We wish to put forward an understanding of bodily in/abilities as neither innate (in-)capacities of organisms nor learned skills of embodied actors (or a lack thereof). Rather, our understanding is that what counts as an “ability” (and what does not), and what this implies, depends on social processes of interpretation, evaluation, and

framing. In this sense, all in/abilities are “ascribed” in that they are not “simply” the result of individual success but the outcome of social processes of attribution. They are “achieved” in so far as these processes are contingent and negotiated. They consist of situated practices and discourses which (a) diagnose, measure, assess, and treat inability, (b) inscribe it in bodies as well as persons, and, thus, (c) process their own specific construct of in/ability.

To gain a sound understanding of bodily abilities, one must also investigate the constitutive logic of *inabilities*: The two are inextricably linked like two sides of a coin; abilities produce inabilities and vice versa. The boundaries between ability and inability are fluid, and how they are drawn is an empirical question. The term “in/abilities” in the title of this issue is designed to highlight this element of contingency and ambiguity: The same doing or quality may be attributed as ability or inability *or* as something else entirely. The “/” is a reminder for research to remain sensitive to what lies beyond the two sides of the deceptively clear-cut difference.

Indicative of this complex hanging together of in/abilities is the multitude of expressions available for talking about abilities: *capabilities*, *capacities*, *skills*, *competencies*, *faculties*, etc. Walking, for example, is considered a basic ability available to all human beings by virtue of their anatomical makeup. One rarely speaks of someone as a (more or less) “(in-)competent” or “(in-)capable” walker. If someone is *unable* to walk, they are usually either deemed drunk or framed as being *disabled* or in some other way *incapacitated*. Similarly, most (other) animals are *not able* to walk (on two legs) but would neither be described as “*incompetent*” or “*unskilled*” walkers, nor as “*incapacitated*”. In the case of infants, however, walking is considered a *skill* that is yet to be acquired by way of practice and at which a child can do better or worse than others. Furthermore, in sports such as running or racewalking, but also in fashion modelling, refined and highly specialized ways of locomotion have evolved which make average adults look like toddlers.

Beneath this linguistic variety lies the social variety of ways in which in/abilities are constructed. What is perceived as an (in-)ability depends on expectations shaped by contexts (e.g., work-related competencies), fields of practice, and categories such as age or species, etc. Possible criteria for distinguishing different in/abilities may include whether they are classed as learnable skills or innate (in-)capabilities, whether they are normatively expected and from whom, and how their performance or absence is evaluated. On top of these parameters, the logic of the *relationship* between inabilities and abilities may vary: Bodily in/abilities may be considered as (a) *absolute*. They are, in this sense, seen as the result of a binary distinction between something a body can or cannot do. (b) In/ability may be a *gradual* differentiation between degrees to which something is done “well” or “correctly”. (c) These two distinctions build on a more fundamental one: the primal distinction of a bodily process as something one can be “able” to do at all, as an “ability” in itself, as opposed to something that just “occurs”.

Empirically, it seems to be the case that inabilities are much more than the simple negation or absence of skills. They are integral to the logic of practices and discourses that produce the social phenomenon of “ability” as such and, along with it, more or less un/able kinds of bodies and people. If one shifts one’s attention away

from more flamboyant abilities, there are a plethora of empirical phenomena worth studying unfolding around bodily inabilities:

1. Inabilities constitute the horizon of processes that establish and produce ability via comparative means, e.g., learning, exercise, practice, and optimization. They also serve as a necessary pendant to constructions of normality.
2. Processes in which bodily abilities (such as sight or mobility) or features (such as continence, sexual prowess, fitness) are forgotten, unlearned, or lost may be discovered as fields of research in their own right.
3. Inabilities of the body form part of larger social fields which often involve practices of diagnosis, treatment, support, or prevention, which can be explored concerning the requisite negotiation of boundaries between in/abilities.
4. Assessing bodily in/ability often leads to a categorical differentiation between “un/able” (groups of) people. The study of in/abilities thus can produce valuable insights into questions of human differentiation, e.g. the classification and subjectification of people (as “unfit”, “dependent”, “disabled”) and their subsequent devalorization.

Thus, the empirical issue is: Under what circumstances is something considered an in/ability and what does this entail? The same can be asked with regard to approaches in social theory: On what conceptualizations of the human body and its in/abilities are they logically based? What could be gained by systematically taking into account the notion of *inabilities* in approaches which previously have paid more attention to ability?

### 3 The articles in this issue

The selection of articles in this issue is intended to shed some light on the questions and fields of research mentioned above. It combines contributions that present findings from the 2018 spring conference of the section “Sociology of the Body and Sports” as part of the German Sociological Association at Mainz University and further articles by authors who responded to an open call.

The first two articles in the issue deal with inabilities in two very different ways and set out to make conceptual contributions to the analysis of inabilities or of social practices more generally.

In their opening article, **Sarah Karim** and **Anne Waldschmidt** explore the relations between in/ability and dis/ability, thus, connecting the sociological issue of in/abilities with the perspective of critical disability studies and their interest in how the production of deviation as cultural process results in the distinction between un/able bodies. Drawing on data from an ongoing research project on sheltered workshops for people with disabilities, they employ a *dispositif*-analytical approach to show how the negotiation of in/abilities is involved in processes of “making” and “un/doing dis/ability”.

**Thomas Alkemeyer** presents a theoretical critique of the functionalist logic present in contemporary practice theories. As he argues, a common thread of the varied approaches in this tradition is the emphasis of the successful workings of

practices and a focus on bodies as mere functional elements therein. Drawing on Marxian and phenomenological work, Alkemeyer crafts an argument for taking into account bodily “unavailability” (Unverfügbarkeit) and the limits of bodily readiness, of which bodily inabilities could be a specific case.

The two subsequent contributions examine practices in which supposedly natural capacities of the body are reframed and transformed into abilities, in the sense of “something someone can be able to do at all”. They analyze, how this reframing affects the evaluation of whether a practice is done “right” or “well”.

Perhaps one of the most unquestioned natural capacities of human bodies, apart from digesting or regulating their temperature, is breathing. However, for his auto-ethnographic research, **Alexander Antony** learned to breathe by practicing “breathwork”. This body-oriented self-experience practice differs from practices commonly studied in the sociology of the body in that it involves little movement and privileges introspection over outward performance. Antony asks how competence is determined and evaluated under such circumstances.

**Laura Völkle** and **Eva Muthmann** study what happens when supposedly natural capabilities of motherly bodies fail. Giving birth and breastfeeding are widely considered two utmost natural capabilities of the female body and are embedded in a morally charged discourse. Analyzing both ethnographic observations in the delivery room and online discourses, the authors argue that both practices have a competitive, project-like character and show in rich empirical detail how presumed mere bodily capabilities become defining qualities of successful motherhood and critical in/abilities of mothers.

The final article deals with an ambivalent subject when it comes to bodily in/abilities. Obesity is often seen both as a consequence of a person’s inability to eat well or control the appetite (or as the inability of a body to, for example, produce sufficient thyroid hormones), and as a cause of bodily inabilities (to move quickly or gracefully, to climb stairs and trees, ...).

**Denise Baumann** investigates the meaning and function of inability within the Weight Watchers weight loss program. From a fat studies perspective, she analyses constructions of inability in the program in both discourse and practice, drawing on auto-ethnographic fieldwork and advertising materials. In this field, Baumann argues, institutional and situational constructions of inability function as a structural element of collectivization rather than as grounds for exclusion. The article illustrates the link between in/abilities and human categorization (Hirschauer 2017): the framing of being overweight as an inability turns participants from being “overweight people” or “fat bodies” into being accountable eaters.

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