

Ger J Exerc Sport Res
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12662-021-00791-x>
 Received: 29 May 2021
 Accepted: 24 November 2021

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‘Save the queen’: female national wheelchair basketball players in gender-segregated and gender-mixed competitive sport

Introduction

Wheelchair basketball is one of the most popular and widespread disability sports. Wheelchair basketball is regarded as a sport in its own right, not as a disability-friendly variation of the game of basketball. What is special is that people without disabilities can play. Wheelchair basketball is very demanding in terms of the athletic components of strength and endurance, as well as in terms of technical and tactical elements. In Germany, there is a competitively oriented league system. Men and women play together on the club teams. On the national teams, however, the genders play separately. In view of this difference, the situation of female athletes in competition seems particularly interesting. However, there has yet been little focus on this complex situation in sport science research. In general, there have only been a few studies on female athletes with disabilities in German-speaking countries (Radtke & Doll-Tepper, 2014; Radtke & Schäfer, 2019; Tiemann, 2006), and for the most part these have not primarily addressed the situation of women in gender-mixed competitive sports for people with and without disabilities.

This article aims at analysing the interdependencies of the difference categories gender and disability in this competition-oriented sport setting. Within the framework of an interview study with players, runners and wheelchair users, of the German National Wheelchair Basketball League, the questions of how these actors shape, experience and interpret the joint

competition of men and women and of people with and without disabilities are pursued. The rarity of competitive athletes of playing in both gender-homogeneous and gender-heterogeneous competition settings suggests the following research questions: How do the difference categories of gender and disability interact in the context of the two competition settings in wheelchair basketball? Which stereotypes can be reconstructed in the two competition settings?

Wheelchair basketball as an elite sport in Germany

In the Rollstuhlbasketball-Bundesliga (RBBL; National Wheelchair Basketball League), people with and without disabilities, and also women and men, play together. This means that the division into male and female, which is predominant in competitive sport, has been abolished here. This is primarily due to the limited number of potential female players and the fact that there is no option for a women’s national league.¹

Another special feature is the classification system for the competition. The classification is intended to construct equal opportunities within a group of physically impaired people (Radtke, 2011). The existing disability and the resulting limitation of performance are assessed in the context of the sport, in

this case, wheelchair basketball (Bundesinstitut für Sportwissenschaft, 2008). Each player receives a score of 1.0 to 4.5, depending on the severity of their disability. The lower the score, the more severe the functional limitation. In total, the five players on the field may not have more than 14 points.²

Players who receive 1 or 2 points are so-called low-pointers. High-pointers, on the other hand, are players with 4 or 4.5 classification points who can assume a high sitting position in the wheelchair due to their sitting stability and mobility. Minimally disabled or non-disabled players are automatically classified as high-pointers with 4.5 points (Classification Commission of the Wheelchair Basketball Committee of the German Wheelchair Sports Association, 2016). It is also worth mentioning the gender-specific rule at the national level (i.e. on mixed-gender teams) that each female player generally has one point deducted from their classification.

Theoretical framework

Joint competitions for people with and without disabilities

In sport, there is a clear segregation along the category of disability. At the institu-

¹ In the 2020/2021 season, a total of 247 players played in the 1st and 2nd German National Wheelchair Basketball League, including 47 women.

² Functional classification is used to assess which sport-specific muscle functions are available to athletes and to what extent, in other words, which functional limitations they are subject to for wheelchair basketball (Strohkendl, 1978).

tional level, a distinction is made between sport clubs and associations for people with disabilities and sport clubs and associations for people without disabilities (Doll-Tepper, 2015). This differentiation continues in the competition system and especially in high-performance sport. This separation between people with and without disabilities is accepted by most players as the normal state of affairs. Joint competitions between people with and without disabilities are a rather rare phenomenon in Germany (Greve & Bechthold, 2019; Radtke, 2018). In order to enable equal participation in such events, it is a basic prerequisite to recognise people with disabilities as athletes (Kiuppis, 2018). In wheelchair basketball, the players with disabilities have a physical disability. In addition, as described above, wheelchair basketball has a tradition of competitive sport and thus a traditional understanding of competition, where the focus is on defeating the opponent. Therefore, it can be assumed that the point of social support for people with disabilities is rather subordinate in the context of wheelchair basketball (Innenmoser, 2012). This is an important difference to other joint competitions for people with and without disabilities, such as Special Olympics Unified Sports® (Greve, Süßenbach, & Stabick, 2021).

There is another interesting point. Wheelchair basketball is an original offering of sport for people with disabilities. People without disabilities have only been able to participate in this sport since 1996 (Kampmeier, 2003). Here, this offer of disabled sports have opened up to people without disabilities. This phenomenon of reverse integration (Janda, 2014) brings opportunities and challenges. In wheelchair basketball, it can be stated that, for example, acting in a wheelchair (as a type of sport equipment) is normal for people with disabilities, but not for athletes without disabilities. However, it can be assumed that this effect can be compensated for through specific training. The classification system described is intended to make the game as fair and equitable as possible. In this way, different levels of disability should be balanced out. The classification described is intended to

remedy this situation, but this seems to be conceivable only to a limited extent, especially in sports games (that involve direct contact with opponents). Another challenge in wheelchair basketball is the joint play of men and women, a special feature in competitive sports games.

Men and women in competitive wheelchair basketball

Gender is a highly relevant category in sport and especially in competitive sport. Competitive sport is gender segregated in almost all sports (Heckemeyer, 2018). Why is this so? Based on the theoretical perspective of social constructivism, in terms of the concept of doing gender, a person's gender is understood to be the result of social processes and interactions (Gildemeister, 2010; West & Fenstermaker, 1995). However, this gender cannot be shaped, changed or neglected at will. Due to prevailing social stereotypes and traditional inequalities, gender-related identity constructions are relatively stable concepts that are permanently reproduced (Hartmann-Tews, 2003). This is accompanied by a clear gender order based on the theoretical background of the symbolic system of dual gender (Hagemann-White, 1984), which is linked to attributions and representations, for example, for typically male and female sports and associated behaviours. Men and women hardly ever play sports together with and against each other, especially in competition. Heckemeyer (2018) notes that competitive sport represents a heteronormatively structured field. If one looks at the social processes of doing gender in sport against this background, various levels seem relevant whose interaction should be considered in breaking down the dominant masculine principles of sport (Messner, 2002):

- Symbolic representations make the social construction of gender inequalities obvious, for example, through terminologies such as 'Women's World Cup' versus 'World Cup' (meaning that the men's tournament does not need to be specified) and generally stereotypical images about

men (e.g. strong) and women (e.g. less capable).

- Social practices based on institutionalised manifest gender inequalities, for example, the separation of the sexes in almost all sport disciplines at the competition level and the often hierarchical relationships between men and women in competitive sport (male coaches—female athletes, male referees—female athletes, e.g. Hartmann-Tews, Rulofs, & Tischer, 2014; Gieß-Stüber, Neuber, Gramespacher, & Salomon, 2008).
- At the level of the individual, the permanent vividness of gender differences, for instance, gender-differentiated findings, indicate early gender-typical sport socialisation (e.g. sport preferences and constellation of motives).

The lack of equality between men and women in sport thus becomes clear. The causes are standardised attributions and expectations of girls and boys or men and women that are shaped by expectations (almost always naturalised) of normality and the interpretive sovereignty of actors relevant to power theory (fellow players, coaches, spectators, etc.).

The only known study in Germany on competitive sport careers in disability sport from a gender-theoretical perspective is by Tiemann (2006). Here too the particularity of mixed-gender teams was taken into account and the perspective of female athletes was analysed. The female athletes in the often male-dominated teams reported experiences of exclusion that can be attributed to their gender. The majority of the female players were underestimated in their performance and had to fight for recognition. This phenomenon occurred mainly in wheelchair basketball and less in the other sports (including individual sports). It was also found that access to the sport was usually through men, as they often held positions as coaches or team spokespersons (Tiemann, 2006). Likewise, the female players interviewed represented traditional collective attributions and expectations of manhood and womanhood in sport. They preferred to train and play with men because the men were more

willing and able to perform. It is noticeable that the collective attributions refer both to playing behaviour, that is, to sporting skills, and to behaviour in social interaction (e.g. women communicate differently).

In wheelchair basketball, the function and significance of the different competition designs (mixed-gender and equal-gender teams at the national and international levels) are interesting for the described research interest.

Methodological procedure

The study conducted pursues the following research questions: How do the difference categories of gender and disability interact in the context of the two competitive settings in wheelchair basketball and what stereotypes can be reconstructed in the two competitive settings?

With a view to this research interest, an intersectional research design was chosen. The aim is to reconstruct the interaction and connection of the difference categories of gender and disability in the social practices of competitive wheelchair basketball. After the theoretical classification, an empirical analysis follows. For this purpose, we focus on social structures (e.g. the association), processes of identity formation (social interactions in the teams) and cultural symbols on the level of representation (e.g. the wheelchair as a type of sport equipment). In this way, the intertwining of the two social categories of difference, gender and disability, will be analysed in their interaction on the three levels described above. In this research approach, the interview partners (five men and seven women) were encouraged to be as open as possible about their competitive sporting careers within the framework of autobiographical narrative interviews (Schütze, 1983). The presentation of one's own sporting career is a selective narration of an autobiographical aspect. In such contexts, the interviewee decides what is important and what is said, thus giving the decisive weight to one's own biography (or the part that was asked about here, the interviewee's career in wheelchair basketball; Schütze, 1983). The interviewee is the expert and selects

between important and unimportant biographical episodes, events and memories. In the present study, this happens in the context of sport (cf. Richartz, 2008).

A valuable characteristic of the narrative interview is the constellation of an interviewee with an unknown private, biographical content. In addition, there is the compulsion to tell based on the narrative prompt. On the one hand, this means that the interviewee needs to describe the content in such detail that it is comprehensible to the interviewer (Schütze, 1983). On the other hand, the interviewee must summarise the narrative in such a way that what is relevant to them in the interviewed research context is highlighted. These aspects of detailing, setting relevance, condensing and summarising (Mey & Mruck, 2009, 2007) are complemented by the need to have presented the interviewer with a comprehensive and completed narrative for the purpose of comprehensibility. If this is not achieved, there is an opportunity for the interviewer to pick up unfinished narrative threads.

The interviews began with a focused narrative prompt:

- I am particularly interested in how you got into wheelchair basketball, how your career started, how it went, how wheelchair basketball has influenced your life and still influences it today

In addition to this prompt, various follow-up questions were asked during halts in the narration, for instance:

- What role did sport play in your life before the accident?
- Can you describe your on- and off-the-field roles in the teams on which you played?
- How do your family and friends view and follow your sporting career?
- You play on a mixed gender team in the Bundesliga. Can you describe that?
- Please describe your professional situation.

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Abstract

In the German National Wheelchair Basketball League, men and women play together. On the national teams, on the other hand, they play separately according to gender. In addition, people without disabilities can also participate in wheelchair basketball. The differences in terms of disability and gender are to be classified and, if possible, eliminated in the competition with a classification system. The intersectional analysis of 12 biographical interviews with current national team players shows a clear reproduction of a traditional gender order. The women report various hierarchical relationships on the playing field that are obviously based on gender. Men play in more important positions and are considered more efficient. Yet these phenomena are mostly taken for granted and hardly questioned. Likewise, certain characteristics are attributed and certain roles are assigned to female players based on their gender. The men interviewed do not see these phenomena or do not reflect on them critically. The difference category of disability also has an influence on the competition setting and the gender discrimination.

Keywords

Inclusion · Disability sport · Grounded theory · Classification · Gender

The 12 interviews were conducted by three researchers.³ The researchers reflected on and discussed their approach in research meetings. There were also optimisations in the questions after the evaluations of the first interviews. The data collection and analysis took place following grounded theory methodology (GTM; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Based on the identity constructions of the athletes, this procedure enables the connection to social structures and symbolic

³ The interviews were conducted in German and translated for publication.

representations and thus avoids a reification of inequality-generating categories. The choice of GTM is also justified by the fact that the individual, subjective perspectives of the athletes should be reconstructed and understood (Mey & Mruck, 2009). Social actions and processes are analysed and compared in this study. Only open and axial coding were used in this study. Selective coding, the elaboration of the core category, was not used. The development of an object-anchored theory was not the focus of the research (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Corresponding phenomena and patterns of action in the sense of the research question could be identified and described. Thus, the coding procedures applied were sufficient for the analysis of the topic at this point (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The insights gained after the first rounds of open coding and the phenomena or categories that seemed provisionally relevant were corroborated and further differentiated through further data collection and axial coding. The results are described below.

Results

The evaluation of the data generated a system of categories according to the analytical procedures described above. This described various phenomena in the light of the questions raised. The phenomena were concisely titled and illustrated with anchor quotations. These were interpreted accordingly.

The male view of women in the game

It became clear in the analysis of the data that the men interviewed said little about gender differences or did not attach any particular importance to them. Exemplary are the statements of male Player D:

Um, and with the woman we have in the team it is actually, yes, normal. So it's not like we treat her differently or, um, and she's been playing with us for 5 or 6 years. Seven years, I don't know how long. But she's been with us for so long that, um, yes, for us, she belongs to us and yes, like ev-

eryone else, so it's not like we treat anyone differently or anything.

Player D does not address the question of the differences between the national teams in the following. Like the other men interviewed, D does not describe any gender-specific phenomena. It is rather the case that the men all reported normality and equal treatment. These statements seem naïve, especially against the background that the men interviewed played wheelchair basketball professionally, whereas the women on the same teams usually had amateur status, which is evident from the interviews. Here, a difference in recognition based on gender within a team becomes clear. Similarly, the men in the RBBL are clearly in the majority. On the other hand, the disadvantages based on the difference category of gender become very clear in the interviews with women. Therefore, anchor quotes from these interviews are used in the following categories to highlight the phenomena.

Women and disability: double disadvantage in mixed teams

The classification system is intended to equalise the different physical conditions and thus create equal opportunities in competition. With regard to playing positions, the data show that the degree of disability has a negative impact on commitment to the game. Gender seems to have the same effect. Women play in central, important positions at the international level, while on club teams these positions are usually occupied by men. The existing or expected physical abilities are decisive here. In the following, female Player B reports on corresponding phenomena with regard to the centre position.

B:

And actually I have played all positions. On the national team I played centre because I am tall. On the club team I mainly played wing (...).

I.:

And what was your role on the national team?

B:

Mainly centre player at the beginning. And then we also had leg amputees. And also some who were taller than me. When you are in a wheelchair, you have a certain inclination to sit in the wheelchair because of your paralysis. That means you sit with your bottom quite far down. Your legs are in front, practically, you don't have any abdominal muscles to keep you in your chair and to prevent you from falling out when you move forward. And a non-disabled person has full muscles. They can sit up straight as high as they are allowed to and still support themselves forward, and that's why my centre role was gone later on, at the moment when the leg amputees and the polios got involved and yes, or meniscus. Many of those who were no longer able to play runners' basketball were then allowed to play on the basis of knee damage, at that time runners in general were also allowed to play [wheelchair] basketball. So they are allowed to play anyway ... Yes, and then I mainly played wing afterwards.

B had started her career as a centre player. When she switched to teams with athletes with less physical limitations, she had to switch to other positions. She described being in a competition for position with runners that she could not win in the long run. Here it becomes clear that opening up wheelchair basketball to athletes without disabilities can also be a disadvantage for the athletes with disabilities. The less-restricted physical possibilities here have a clear influence on the occupation of the centre position, which is very important in wheelchair basketball. Centre players usually score many points and are crucial for the team's success. Here, a female player with a greater disability takes a secondary role. Likewise, B described that she was able to play this position on the women's national team and not on the gender-mixed club team. There she mostly acts as a winger. This position is clearly less relevant for deciding victory and defeat in the game. Female player B thus bears much less responsibility for the success of her team in the club team than in the national team. B does not criticise this, but accepts it as the status quo. The intertwined disadvantages

based on the categories of gender and disability seemed to her to be a given and could not be changed. Likewise, for B this was interwoven into the sporting competition and was part of her career. The phenomena in competition associated with the difference category of gender are described in more detail below.

Collective stigmatising of attributions in competition

The different competition settings (mixed-gender and single-gender) are described intensively by all players in the interviews. Collective and at the same time stigmatising attributions are made for men and women in wheelchair basketball. These concerned, among other things, different ways of playing and competences in competition. At various points, the men's game seemed to be considered superior. However, important qualities based on gender were also attributed to female players. While the men tended to refer to women's qualities in social interaction, the female players emphasised their tactical competence. This becomes visible, for example, in the interview excerpt from female Player E:

We need to be strong to be able to play internationally. Although we understand the game, the speed of the men and the power conversion means we learn things that we as women wouldn't learn otherwise. Thus, because we are challenged by the men and we want to play, we want to keep up; we don't hold back. Yes, that's all very well. But we have to be able to play with each other. (...) Yes, the women, as I said, played more with tactics, learned the blocks, learned the moves and so on. The men tried to focus a lot on speed. The women did blocks and so on. That means you have to be able to play together with the wing and centre players on the side. Then you can, if you play together, score more easily. At that time, the men always tried to play individually; whoever was faster than the other would come in and score. Yes, there was a big difference between what the women used to play and what the men used to play.

E's statements are determined by collective attributions. These show a traditional

image of men and women in sporting competition. Men play more selfishly than women and have advantages because of athleticism. It is interesting that disability obviously does not play a role here. The women have to assert themselves 'with the men.' According to E, this inevitably leads to women having to develop tactical qualities. Thus, the women's game is more tactical and cooperative. They seem to make better use of their teammates. According to E, the men's game, or the way of playing experienced in the mixed-gender teams in the Bundesliga, is more physically demanding than games among women. The level of play determined by the men in the Bundesliga helps the women in their tasks on the national team (e.g. World Championships and Paralympic Games). This reproduction of a gender stereotype presented here (men are faster and stronger and have a better playing ability than women) is exemplary of the statements of the female players.

Asymmetric power structures on the field

With regard to inequality dimensions of men and women in wheelchair basketball, it can be noted that the quota of women in the gender-mixed teams was low. In addition, it is clear from the interview statements that men who can play wheelchair basketball as a profession without restrictions received better pay. The women interviewed pursued gainful part-time or full-time employment alongside sport, which represented a double burden. Thus, the male players had higher material recognition and security, although the women played this sport on the same or partly on a higher performance level. These structural components influence the complex situation and seem like a mirror for the typical phenomena that can be described in the context of the gender-mixed RBBL between men and women. These often involved stereotypical attributions and representations of gender. Female Player F described a concrete situation that again made use of the image of the strong men and the weaker women.

I was the mum of the team. Um, and what did—G [a teammate] was so sweet, (...) pretty much at the end of the season, (...) we played against Lahn-Dill 2 I think. (...) That was a cup game. And um, some asshole twisted my arm really badly, really badly. It really hurt. Um, I took the ball up here and he didn't just take the ball from me as a huge person, but he grabbed my arm, took the ball and drove away. And so, I couldn't play anymore. Um, and I was substituted because nothing worked at the moment and then G said 'Save the queen' and they really gave it to him—he played hard and shut him down, the guy suffered. The Lahn-Dill player suffered. He said, 'If you do something to our queen, you suffer for it. You suffer for it'. And really when opponents were very rough, they said 'Who did that? Number so and so? Mhm'. They didn't necessarily foul, but they played hard basketball against him.

F describes a concrete situation in which a teammate committed a revenge foul on an opponent. The teammate's intention seems to be based on a protective instinct for the 'queen'. The male teammate interprets the female teammate as needing protection. This creates the weak position for the 'queen'. F's language is also striking: She describes the action as 'sweet' and herself as the 'mummy of the team'. Here, too, classic role models or behaviour patterns become clear.

But it was not only the interaction in the team that was gender-stereotypically charged. The competitive situation in the team itself was also influenced accordingly. This is described by female player K (herself a 1-point female player) in a section about the internal team competition for game shares.

I compete in my category. I compete when ... When I compete, I compete with the one-point men. But also not really. Um, everyone on my team has to be better than me. Firstly, men, and secondly, more points. They have to be better because otherwise 'they're too bad'. They have to be faster than me. There's just no other way. They have to be faster because they have more points. If they are slower, they won't play because they are too bad. They

have to be faster than me in the RBBL. That's just the way it is. If they're slower: bye-bye.

K was one of two women on her team. The other woman was classified higher and thus, according to K, must be more powerful. According to K, the men must be more powerful in the competition due to their gender. This also applies to all other men in the RBBL. From these statements it is clear that the classification system reinforces gender inequalities. The hierarchisation of men and women is correspondingly charged and is openly addressed by the female players. It is a matter of course for K that the same score does not stand for an equal level of performance. A man with the same score must be more powerful. On the one hand, this results in corresponding performance pressure for the men and on the other hand, it is again taken for granted by the women.

Discussion

The basic aim of this study was to explore the claim of equal participation in the competitive sport of wheelchair basketball. An attempt is made to enable equal opportunities through a classification system that takes into account the two social categories of difference: disability and gender. When comparing two teams, this system may succeed in a comprehensible and transparent way through criteria that are based on objectifiable differences such as gender and the degree of disability. However, our data make clear that the mutual interweaving between the categories of gender and disability reveals asymmetrical power structures in a field of sport that claims to enable equal opportunities in competition. From a functional perspective, this succeeds to the extent that differences between the genders are balanced out through classifications. However, this measure reinforces the differences between the genders and leads to asymmetrical player roles and game shares. In the players' perceptions, these are accepted as normal and self-evident. For example, no interviewee questions the fact that many more men than women play in an RBBL team. The

benchmark for successful games is powerful and fast play, which is usually dominated by men (c.f. Heckemeyer, 2018). The women's game, which is reported to be more based on interplay and cooperation, but the physical game seems to be the desirable standard. The gender-mixed sports game practice in combination with the incorporated gender knowledge contributes to a stabilisation of the hierarchical gender order (c.f. Scheer, 2019).

In the competitive sport of wheelchair basketball, there is constant comparison in one's own classification category and high competitive pressure. Those who do not meet the standardised performance requirements (which may result from the classification system) are selected accordingly. This is also common in Paralympic competitive sport. Our data show that the focus is not exclusively on individual performance but that described inequality dimensions are also relevant.

The men do not recognise these inequalities, while the women very much do. The women take this for granted and name advantages for their own play on single-gender teams. They experience the appreciation of their position as a weaker female player when they are protected by the men. The women adapt to the style of play of the male-dominated game (i.e. powerful and dynamic), which is the "right game" and thus the reference norm, whereas women's more cooperative way of playing, which has developed due to physical inferiority, clearly ranks behind it. In this context, collective identities are recognisable through demarcating linguistic terms. This refers to demarcations (such as 'we' and 'they') that denote a certain group membership and express perceptions of self and others about inclusion and exclusion of group memberships. This is also evident in the attribution processes of the interviewees. These patterns are also evident in the social interactions of the female players outside the field. The women receive recognition and appreciation for these behaviours.

Conclusion

In the analysis of the competitive setting of wheelchair basketball, a clear reproduction of a traditional gender structure becomes visible. The reinforcement of power-hierarchical gender relations in the given structures of sport (e.g. classification system and mixed-gender and single-gender competitions) is accepted as natural by the players and influences their identity formation. The question arises whether the implementation of a gender-mixed sport setting in Paralympic competitive sport is at all possible without reproducing the social construction of gender stereotypes. Future research should identify ways to sensitise stakeholders to the issues of disability-gender-performance.

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Acknowledgements. The authors would like to thank Jakob Kettenburg, Lena Minekel and Sophie Zint, who worked on this project as part of their master's theses.

Funding. The research described here is part of the project 'Rollstuhlbasketball vermitteln und Talente in der Schule spielend finden' (RoBaTaS). This project is funded by the Bundesinstitut für Sportwissenschaft (BISp) on the basis of a resolution of the German Bundestag (registration number: PR020181200137).

Funding. Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

Declarations

Conflict of interest. S. Greve and J. Süßenbach declare that they have no competing interests.

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants or on human tissue were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1975 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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