

(Dis)Abled Riders and Equestrian Sports



Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this study is to explore and analyse contemporary discourses on horse riding for disabled people in Sweden. Three research questions were posed:

- *Is compulsory able-bodiedness an aspect of equestrian sport and if so, how is this manifested?*
- *Are subjects described as flexible or able-bodied?*
- *Is equestrian sport an arena for producing, securing and containing disability?*

Background

In Sweden, horse riding for disabled people is included in the Swedish Equestrian Federation. The perception of ability and disability in equestrian sports is interesting and significant, as the body of the rider also interacts with that of the horse. The body and the ways in which it is perceived are central in all sports. Bodies are labelled as able or disabled, and physical functionality is used as a classifying measurement (Peers 2012; Silva & Howe 2012).

Discourse analysis and crip theory

The source material consists of semi-structured interviews with persons linked to organised riding for the disabled in Sweden, and various texts from the Swedish Equestrian Federation. Discourse analysis is used as a methodological and theoretical tool (cf. Fairclough 2001) together with crip theory.



Crip theory (McRuer 2006) analyses what is perceived as a normal body, and how the construction of normality subordinates and delineates what is not normal, according to the theory of *compulsory able-bodiedness*.

Results and discussion

Three major recurring discourses are identified in the source material:

1) *Equality and inclusion:*

An inclusive view of participants in equestrian sport, acknowledging individuality and uniqueness, which does not seem to regard differences as deviancies. The subject is seen as flexible; every rider is unique regardless of ability.

2) *Concealed exclusion and segregation:*

Central to this discourse is the fact that equestrian disability sport is organised as a separate discipline within the federation, implying segregation and differentiation based on physical ability rather than type of activity.

3) *Acceptance and differentiation through focus on impairment:*

In this discourse the tendency is to focus on the impairment and what a rider can do in spite of his or her disability.

Conclusion

The discourses identified are contradictory, although they are all represented in the federation, and produce bodies that are able, disabled, or flexible. The rhetoric of inclusion is strong. The fact that horse riding for disabled people is organised within the Swedish Equestrian Federation enhances the discourse of inclusion. However, “Disability” is organised as a separate discipline (cf. dressage, show-jumping). This can be interpreted as a discourse of exclusion, as disabled riders are separated from others based on impairment rather than their actual level of proficiency. Practices vary between riding schools.

The study will be published in “Sport, Animals and Society” (ed. James Gillett & Michelle Gilbert) in 2013 by Routledge.

References

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- McRuer, R. (2006). *Crip Theory. Cultural signs of queerness and disability*. New York university Press.
- Peers, D. (2012). Patients, Athletes, Freaks: Paralympism and the Reproduction of Disability. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 36 (3), 295-316.
- Silva, C. F. & Howe, D. (2012); The (In)validity of *Supercrip* Representation of Paralympian Athletes. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, Vol. 36, No. 2, 174-194.