

SAGGI – ESSAYS

“DIFFERENT” BODIES:
HYBRIDISATIONS AND TRANSFORMATIONS
IN THE BIOGRAPHICAL STORYLINES OF
PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

CORPI “DIVERSI”:
IBRIDAZIONI E TRASFORMAZIONI NELLE STORIE
BIOGRAFICHE DI PERSONE CON DISABILITÀ

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This article, moving within the conceptual framework of Embodied Cognition (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2005), aims at investigating the embodied representations of the bodies of people with physical disabilities in identity construction processes. In this way, the article helps to shape a culture that embraces differences and values body diversity.

As described by existing literature on the subject (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Giaconi, Del Bianco, D’Angelo, Taddei, Caldarelli & Capellini, 2021; Giaconi, Del Bianco, D’Angelo, Taddei & Rodrigues, 2020), the life stories of people with disabilities, including athletes, represent a privileged way to access the processes of signification of corporeity, interpretation of diversity and overcoming of binary logics (male/female, natural/artificial). Indeed, when the hybridisations and transformations of “different” bodies emerge directly from the words of people with disabilities, one can gauge their profound distance from media representations of disability, awash with ableist narrative styles (Bocci, De Castro & Zona, 2020; Giaconi & Capellini, 2019). Following this

direction, this article will highlight the possibilities of a pedagogical work intentionally focused on the narratives of athletes with disabilities.

Questo articolo, muovendosi all’interno del quadro concettuale dell’*Embodied Cognition* (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2005), si propone di indagare le rappresentazioni incarnate dei corpi delle persone con disabilità fisica nei processi di costruzione dell’identità. In questo modo, l’articolo contribuisce a formare una cultura che abbraccia le differenze e valorizza la diversità corporea.

Come descritto dalla letteratura esistente sull’argomento (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Giaconi, Del Bianco, D’Angelo, Taddei, Caldarelli & Capellini, 2021; Giaconi, Del Bianco, D’Angelo, Taddei & Rodrigues, 2020), le storie di vita delle persone con disabilità, compresi gli atleti, rappresentano una via privilegiata per accedere ai processi di significazione della corporeità, di interpretazione della diversità e di superamento delle logiche binarie (maschio/femmina, naturale/artificiale). Infatti, quando le ibridazioni e le trasformazioni dei corpi “diversi” emergono direttamente dalle parole delle persone con disabilità, si può misurare la loro profonda distanza dalle rappresentazioni mediatiche della disabilità, intrise di stili narrativi abili (Bocci, De Castro & Zona, 2020; Giaconi & Capellini, 2019). Seguendo questa direzione, questo articolo evidenzierà le possibilità di un lavoro pedagogico intenzionalmente incentrato sulle narrazioni degli atleti con disabilità.

1. Introduction

Moving from the conceptual implications proper to *Embodied Cognition* (Giaconi et al., 2020; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2005), in this contribution we will highlight how the narrative approach by athletes with disabilities can contribute to the restitution of cultural and social transformation processes (Berger, 2008; Car-

boni, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Giaconi, Caldarelli & Del Bianco, 2019; Giaconi et al., 2020; Quatera, 2016; 2018; Spoto, 2018). In order to avoid feeding the new stereotypes of the “in spite of everything”, the super-crip or the superhuman, typical of a media narrative that promotes the social representation of the athlete-hero (Berger, 2008), we believe that it is important to choose to corroborate the narratives of people with disabilities themselves (Bocci et al., 2020). Life stories lived and narrated in the first person are, in fact, capable of unlocking the intimate meanings of experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004) and of generating processes of transformation that activate alternative ways of acting and thinking (Giaconi et al., 2020). The narratives of the athletes themselves allow them to overcome and deconstruct «the mainstream representations of their condition proposed by the media» (Bocci et al., 2020, p. 139).

Specifically, as we delve into biographical trajectories, we will explore how corporeity and movement become interwoven with unfolding life paths, investing everyday life with new processes of signification, i.e., the embodied representations of the self (Giaconi et al., 2020). As an «immediate and concrete experience of corporeity» (Mirabile, 2009, p. 7) that pushes the subject into a relationship with the surrounding context, as the interviews themselves seem to demonstrate, physical/sporting activity comes to be configured as a process of re-organising experience, acting as a motive for emancipation and growth (Gomez Paloma & Sgamberulli, 2012). Therefore, in the processes of identity reconstruction of one’s corporeity, sporting activity, having positive effects on both the physical and emotional and relational spheres of athletes, reverberates within the entire construct of Quality of Life (Shalock & Verdugo Alonso, 2006). It is, in fact, possible to trace direct repercussions on the domains of physical well-being, personal development and social inclusion, and indirectly on those of emotional well-being and self-determination (Giaconi, 2015).

Starting from the development of such awareness, we will finally trace the formative value of the narratives of the life stories

of persons with disabilities within the initial and ongoing training of professionals (Giaconi et al., 2020).

2. The epistemological framework

The epistemological framework of Embodied Cognition (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2005) allows us to frame the present reflection on the body-narrative pair, enabling us to come to an understanding of the transformations affecting the corporeity of athletes with physical disabilities in reference to space and time also through their own narratives.

Apart from the various processes of signifying corporeity, interpreting diversity and binary logics (male/female, natural/artificial), embodiment roots human cognition in sensory and motor processes in a constant interaction with the context (Laakso, 2011; Schubert & Semin, 2009; Sheya & Smith, 2010; Stapleton, 2013). In this perspective, the strictly materialistic view of the body is overcome, opening up new dimensions that instead study embodied existence (Ghirotto, 2020). As Ghirotto states:

each body is more than a collection of anatomical and physical structures: just as it is impossible to grasp the meaning of a gesture from the sum of muscular movements, it is not possible to appreciate the existential scope of being-body by analysing only the sum of functions and abilities (p. 61).

Thus, corporeality represents the object of the self and the self that occupies space in the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2005), becoming both an essential dimension in the construction of one's identity and a meaning-making entity with respect to the different spheres of life with which the person interacts (Ghirotto, 2020; Reynolds, 2017). In contemporary experiencing and creating the world, corporeality allows access to cultural and social context, representing the essence of relationships (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2005). Therefore, the body orients reciprocity, generating changes in the experience of time and living spaces, thus influenc-

ing the representations that are made reflecting it (Ghirotto, 2020; Giaconi et al., 2020).

Particularly significant in this regard are the processes of embodied representation in those with a physical disability, especially an acquired one, where a fracture appears between the existence lived before the traumatic event and that perceived after that event, which is often difficult to reconstruct: «beforehand, the body inhabited the category of adequate, now it loses or fails to hold onto that dimension» (Medeghini, 2010). Acquired disability forces one to come to terms with the sudden impact of a previously unexperienced condition of “non-functioning” of the body that calls into question one’s spatial and temporal coordinates in daily life and sociality, in order to find new strategies for re-signifying one’s self in the world (Ghianda, 2008; Millefiorini, 2021). This disability, by subverting corporeity, immediately compels the subject to rethink the relationship with his or her new body, and here coping strategies are decisive in reaching the path of acceptance (Bragaru, Dekker, Geertzen & Dijkstra, 2011; Martin Ginis, Jetha, Mack & Hetz, 2010). Out of the main occasions of re-birth, the literature (Cereda, 2016; Di Nocera, Ferri & Vaillant, 2000; Di Palma, Ascione & Peluso Cassese, 2017; Di Palma, Raiola & Tafuri, 2016; Gomez Paloma & Sgambelluri, 2012; Jaarsma, Geertzen, de Jong, Dijkstra & Dekker, 2013; Kavaliauskas & Vaitkevicius, 2013; Radzeviciene, 2007; Saebu & Sørensen 2011; Samsonienė, Adomaitienė & Kriviciūtė, 2008; Visentin, 2016; Wilson & Clayton, 2010) traces sporting activity as a privileged starting point for the reconstruction of one’s own body image. Movement and, therefore, sport constitute channels of expression, attitudes and personal intentionalities that become semantics capable of generating instances of value and relational character (Russo, 2013). Education in sport, according to Russo (2013), can lay the groundwork for the occurrence of what Goffman (2003) calls acceptance: through sport, the person with disabilities becomes capable of re-appropriating their social identity and promoting a different representation of Self (Russo, 2013). Therefore, the project dimension of sport also becomes a

possible declination of the personal and life dimension (Isidori, 2009).

3. Embodied representations of bodies: people with disabilities tell their stories

The experiences of people with acquired physical disabilities allow us to trace significant reference points in the direction of implementing resilience strategies for the reconstruction of their identity, thus redefining their personal and social balance in order to re-orient their life project.

Building on our previous research and the interviews we conducted in *L'Escluso* (Giaconi, Caldarelli & Del Bianco, 2019), in this section we will highlight in an illustrative way how two American Paralympic champions, Bryan Barten and Cohn Chad, identified opportunities and possibilities to rethink their existential trajectory.

As we have previously traced in the relevant literature (Medeghini, 2010; Millefiorini, 2021) «motricity [...], both directly – by developing the body schema – and indirectly (by giving rise to schematic representations of actions) contributes largely to the formation of the sense of identity» (Gomez Paloma & Sgamberulli, 2012, p. 81).

In this respect, the words of Bryan Barten, currently head coach of the University of Arizona wheelchair tennis team, testify to the dualistic logic of pre- and post-accident identity construction:

[b]efore my accident I was very active as an athlete, I played basketball, football, liked mountain biking, hiking and many other activities. Because of this, the first year after the accident I was very bored, as I no longer had any outdoor sports to play [...]. It was very difficult to adapt to my new life after losing everything I knew (Giaconi et al., 2019, p. 107).

The words of wheelchair-bound US National Rugby Team athlete Cohn Chad also confirm the generation of new strategies

of adaptation and realisation for re-engineering oneself after the accident:

[l]ooking back, surely the most difficult time was the initial one, specifically, in the first two months after the accident. The right word that could encapsulate that period might be denial, or something very similar [...]. In my eyes my [...] dream was shattered, as I realised that I could no longer be the sportsman I used to be [...]. After my accident I had a sporting void for some years. This was not because people did not try to involve me, but because I thought I had a great life before the accident and, therefore, I refused to think that being in this condition would be permanent for me (Giaconi et al., 2019, p. 112).

In line with the aforementioned research (Giaconi et al., 2019), the words of those with disabilities whom we interviewed also highlight how sporting activity comes to be seen as a privileged practice that leads to a re-construction and re-affirmation of one's identity starting from the image of one's own corporeity, which takes on a powerful regenerative value.

With reference to the role played by sport in his life, Bryan Barten states:

I think sport has allowed me to be an athlete again and this has supported me in my daily life. Sport has helped me both emotionally and physically. It has given me a reason to train and to get stronger and stronger. It has enabled me to be a healthier and happier person. I can say that sport has helped me beyond my sporting achievements; it has helped me in life (Giaconi et al., 2019, p. 108).

Cohn Chad also claims that sport has played a crucial role in his life:

[p]robably, until I got married, sport was my whole life. Once I was into rugby, even, I didn't have a balance between sport and private life, but if I hadn't created the right balance, I probably would have burnt out years ago. However, even today sport still plays a significant role in my life: it is who I am, it is what I want and it is my job. I think the

great thing about sport is that it can change your life (Giaconi et al., 2019, p. 111).

Sporting activity emerges from the narratives both as a source of personal empowerment and as a privileged context for accessing new relational contexts (Jaarsma et al., 2013; Radzeviciénė, 2007; Saebu & Sørensen 2011; Samsonienė, Adomaitienė & Kriviciūtė, 2008). Sport, therefore, is considered a social event (Isidori, Fraile & Aranda, 2012) permeated by positive values and, therefore, in full agreement with the assumption of inclusion (Isidori, 2002).

Bryan Barten’s words testify to this:

[t]he game can be played by able-bodied people and wheelchair users at the same time and this was great for me because it allowed me to play with my friends again. I fell in love with the sport and it became my passion (Giaconi et al., 2019, p. 108).

The same point of view is confirmed by Cohn Chad: «[b]eing in contact with a group of other people who were in a similar situation to mine, even though we all have very different injuries or disabilities, gave me back that emptiness» (Giaconi et al., 2019, p. 111).

The direct narratives of people with disabilities who have faced journeys of rebirth through sport, allow us, as we will see in the next section, to arrive at the legitimisation and generalisation of the same in plural social contexts, thus innervating the development of possible inclusive arrangements.

4. Future perspectives

What has emerged in this article allows us to focus our attention on the formative and transformative value of narration by persons with disabilities.

Media narratives or those mediated by other interlocutors, in truth, do not always wear the garb of acceptance and only appar-

ently that of inclusion. For example, the bionic body is often exposed to heroic narratives that on the one hand feed a vision of the physically disabled person as more capable, more equipped than others, but on the other hand do not reject the stereotype of incompetence (Meyer & Asbrock, 2018), thus returning a sterile image of the disabled body.

In order to prevent such discursive devices from being reproduced, we believe it is important to achieve a change that can be affirmed through the biographical narratives of athletes with disabilities (Bocci et al., 2020; Del Bianco, 2019; Giaconi et al., 2019; Giaconi et al., 2020). As witnessed by the words we have briefly retraced in this contribution, the narration of one's own experiences becomes a form of self-help, which allows one to remember, re-elaborate and accept one's own experience in order to then take back one's own existence with greater awareness and hope, to the point of self-acceptance (Millefiorini, 2021).

Self-narration therefore becomes a tool capable of externalising the most intimate dimensions of experiences, and of averting the creation or reiteration of stereotypes, supporting, on the other hand, processes of self-representation (Bocci et al., 2020). It is precisely the first-person narration of athletes' rebirths that allows the idea of disability as an immutable condition to be dismantled (Canevaro, 2008). The implementation of contexts capable of contributing to the full personal expression of the desires, needs and expectations of people with disabilities can, in our opinion, be achieved through the self-narration of one's own disability and experiences with opportunities for rebirth, to be projected within and beyond the practice of sport. In this direction, representations of the fragile body, of reduced autonomy, of denied self-determination, give way to new perspectives in the different social and relational contexts of a community, contributing to the reduction of discrimination associated with disability (D'Angelo, 2019; Visentin, 2016).

As recalled in other works (Del Bianco et al., 2019; Giaconi et al., 2019), storytelling is confirmed to be a heuristic way of formation and transformation (Giaconi & Capellini, 2019) capable,

on the one hand of entering into the meanings of experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004) and, on the other hand, of activating processes of social transformation (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005).

For these reasons, in order to pursue the desire to generate a new contamination of the social representations of society, pedagogical work intentionally aimed at the narration of the life stories of athletes with disabilities appears fundamental. Hence, narration represents a valid tool to orient the training paths of future teachers in the direction of implementing a close knowledge of people with disabilities, and in the determination of professional habitus capable of generating inclusive contexts (Altet, Charlier, Paquay & Perrenoud, 2006; Giaconi et al., 2020). We believe, in fact, that an innovative approach to inclusive training is precisely that which traverses the plots of the stories of people with disabilities, as they allow us to deal with pedagogical issues relevant to the construction of an inclusive professional profile (Giaconi et al., 2021). The work of designing and implementing a format on life stories and identity reconstruction can, therefore, represent the central focus for the inclusive training of future educational professionals¹.

¹ In line with the experimentation of lifelong learning pathways for inclusion (Aleandri & Giaconi, 2012), a co-design pathway with persons with disabilities was activated for teacher training at the University of Macerata. The format was designed by a team of experts in Pedagogy and Special Education, video makers, computer technicians and people with disabilities. The aim was to write and stage the story of people with disabilities in the teacher training courses. The format was then incorporated into the teaching curriculum, taking into account the need to find innovative devices for training adult learners who are already at an advanced stage of their professional career and often come from very different backgrounds. The format envisages orienting the training courses, which rotate between practice and theory (Altet et al., 2006), around the fulcrum of the stories of persons with disabilities, in this case video-narratives. The format was consistently used in the teachings in a.y. 2019-2020 of “Pedagogy and Special Didactics of Intellectual Disability and Autistic Spectrum Disorder” forming part of the specialisation course for support activities for preschool, primary, lower secondary and upper secondary school teaching at the University of Macerata.

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