

How young people with mental disorders experience sports. A qualitative study.

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### **Abstract**

In light of current prevalence rates associated with general societal processes such as increasing pressure to perform or rising poverty among children and young adults, young adults with mental disorders are being categorised as a new social problem group in public debates.

Based on the assumption that sport plays a different, significance-charged role in the lives of this group – for example as a school subject, as a youth lifestyle element, as a social guiding value or as a therapeutic medium – the qualitative study focuses on the subjective perspective of young adults with an attested mental disorder. Fourteen young adults were asked about their experiences with sport using guided interviews. The overriding goal of the study is to reconstruct their experience of sport in the different settings of their current everyday lives (e.g. school sports, leisure sports, and also therapeutic sports). Experiences, attitudes and interpretations of the field of activity are here analysed, among other things with respect to institutional and normative conditions of sport.

The study is contoured by the social constructivist understanding that forms the basis of the phenomenon of mental disorder: according to the social constructivist approach, mental disorders describe behaviour, attitudes and feelings that are assessed in the context of valid norms and expectations as being disconcerting or even disturbing (in the sense of deviating from the norm) – and are thus relative. In line with this assumption, the analytical focus of the study is less on the influence of the attested disorder of the individual question on their experience. To a far greater extent, new knowledge was generated as to which behaviour and thoughts are perceived by others as being divergent in the sport settings.

For those questioned, sport overall emerges as being a distinctly ambivalent field of activity, which attracts them in terms of its highly positive image, while at the same time equally overtaxing them. In the experience of this field of activity, a fluctuation is predominantly reflected between optimism and frustration, which characterises their overall situation. Thus, those questioned can on the one hand experience sport as being personally positive for themselves in their particular life situation – from a health perspective, at the affective level and not least with regard to self-profiling and emancipation. On the other hand, the young adults repeatedly discover that they are unable to adequately meet the expectations required of them in sport, which triggers long-term frustration among them. The normative expectations embedded in sport, such as body exposure and body contact, being able to deal with expressive, rapidly changing emotionality, stamina, the willingness to work hard or also a (non-verbal) ability to communicate emerge as being demanding prerequisites for those questioned in relation to their participation in sport. On balance, the new findings lead one to conclude that the psychosocial requirement potential of sport as a field of activity is anything but low-threshold, which is argued in the context of lines of discussion relating to sports education.

