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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**SPORTS PRACTICES OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES AND SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS: THE  
CASE OF THE HANDISPORT CLUB OF THE GASTON BERGER UNIVERSITY OF SAINT-LOUIS  
(SENEGAL)**

**Hameth Dieng<sup>1</sup>, Mouhamed Dit Momar Talla Ndongo<sup>2</sup> and Gana Ndione<sup>3</sup>**

1. Enseignant Chercheur Université Gaston BERGER de Saint-Louis.
2. Enseignant Chercheur Université Cheikh Anta DIO de Dakar.
3. Enseignant Chercheur Université Gaston BERGER de Saint-Louis.

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**Abstract**

This research collects and analyzes social representations built on sports practice among people with disabilities in a society where practice is perceived as almost impossible for this social category. The objective of this research, which takes place in the disabled sports club of Gaston Berger University in Saint-Louis, is to understand how people with disabilities perceive their sports practice and in return how those around them perceive their investment in sport. To understand the social representations of sports practice among people with disabilities in a country where it is perceived as abnormal and dangerous and where the perception of handicap differs according to the person and his environment, the study was mainly based on discourse analysis from semi-structured interviews. Those semi-structured interviews were carried out with administrators, coaches, families and practitioners from the disabled sports club of Gaston Berger University in Saint-Louis. It emerges from this study that the constructed social representations are differentiated and constitute a system of opposition between those of the practitioners and their trainers on the one hand and those of the social environment on the other hand. Sport which is considered as a Western cultural model reserved for men and the able-bodied, happens to be largely determined by all prevailing social representations, including those stereotypes linked to people with disabilities.

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**Introduction:-**

The objective of our research is to collect, analyze and interpret the social representations of the practice of sports by people with disabilities and more precisely in the handisport club of the Gaston BERGER University of Saint-Louis.

In order to understand the social representations of the practice of sports by people with disabilities in a country where its practice is perceived as abnormal and dangerous and where the perception of disability differs according to the person and his environment, the study relied mainly on the analysis of speeches made from semi-directive interviews.

**Corresponding Author:-Hameth Dieng**

Address:-Enseignant Chercheur Université Gaston BERGER de Saint-Louis.

Based on semi-directive interviews with the administrative staff, the coaches, the families and the participants of the handisport club of the Gaston BERGER University of Saint-Louis, this research showed that the social representations constructed are differentiated and constitute a system of opposition between those of the participants and their coaches on the one hand and those of the social environment on the other hand.

It emerges from this study that the constructed social representations are differentiated and constitute a system of opposition between those of the practitioners and their trainers on the one hand and those of the social environment on the other. Sport, considered as a Western cultural model reserved for men and able-bodied people, is largely determined by all the social representations in force, including those of stereotypes linked to people with disabilities.

This research is part of a reflexive perspective in order to contribute to the promotion and development of sports practice for people with disabilities. By identifying the cultural factors limiting access to the practice of sport enshrined in the right to sport (Orientation Law n° 2010-15 of 06/07/2010), it can enable the development of strategies to promote the development of inclusive sport as a source of achievement, integration and leadership building for people with disabilities in the commune of Saint-Louis and elsewhere in Senegal.

In this study, we will first present the problem and the questions that arose from it. Next, we will explain, based on sociological data, the concept of social representation and give the elements of the study methodology. Finally, we will present, discuss and analyze the results of the research.

### **Problematics**

African societies do not accept disability well and the causes they give it allow them to avoid taking responsibility for this reality. In Africa, the cause of disability is often detached from the person concerned, and is often linked to nature.

This is why traditional societies based on orality have always developed theories based on myths to explain disability, the occurrence of impairment and the existence of differences. From these popular, cultural theories, which are social representations, stems the way in which people with disabilities are considered and treated, particularly those involved in sports. In the African reality, disability is seen as a divine punishment. This obscurantism weighs on the person judged to be different, especially the person with a disability or reduced mobility.

Consequently, being a person with a disability implies discrimination in various fields, particularly in education, access to sports and socio-professional integration. The place of the person with a disability is assimilated with the street. Their main activity is begging.

In spite of cultural factors and hostile representations, Senegal is firmly committed to promoting people with disabilities through strong legislative and regulatory measures. Thus, in October 2001, during an interministerial council, the Senegalese government published 19 directives for the protection of disabled people.

Then, on April 25, 2007, Senegal signed the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) adopted by the United Nations.

In this context, on January 22, 2009, the Council of Ministers had adopted a draft law on the promotion and protection of persons with disabilities which was voted by the National Assembly after examination by its committees and in plenary on May 26, 2010 (Social Orientation Law n° 2010-15 of 06/07/2010). Among the provisions retained by the said law, there were the ones regarding the right to do sport and leisure activities. These legislative provisions that guarantee the right to education, teaching, training, employment and the right to sport for people with disabilities and representations of disability that are reversing are moving the lines.

Nowadays, disability is no longer seen as an obstacle. On the contrary, it is a challenge for everyone concerned. There are quite a few people with disabilities who occupy high positions, like Oscar PISTORIUS who is the only Paralympics' athlete who dared to compete with so-called "able-bodied" people despite his difference (NDIAYE, F Z, 2021).

Physical and sports activities are social and cultural practices and they constitute at the same time a means of education, promotion and distinction of individuals belonging to a given society (Bourdieu, 1998). Thus, sport has long been perceived as a masculine world (Davis and Louveau, 1991, 1998; Harry, 1995). Despite this masculinization, and a strong religious, cultural, and social anchoring, Senegal is increasingly experiencing women's involvement in traditionally masculine sports representing "a transgression of socio-cultural norms" (Ndongo, 2017, Dieng, 2020).

However, the practice of physical and sports activities by people with disabilities remains very low and suffers from prejudice and very negative representations despite the actions to promote an inclusive sport adapted to people with reduced mobility. In this perspective, the investment of people with disabilities in sport generates factors of resistance and even social stigmatization (Goffman 1963). Indeed, the person with a disability is excluded from sport by society, which considers that the person with reduced mobility has no chance of using his or her physical abilities (Ndiaye, 2021).

Sport is a source of integration for people with disabilities who are often marginalized in their living environment (Fuster and Jeanne, 2000), even if the status of the person with a disability has the greatest difficulty in distinguishing itself from the status of its disabled body.

The study of the sports practice of people with disabilities, which is currently being developed, seems to us to be very relevant insofar as it allows us to answer the following question: What are the social representations of the sports practices of people with disabilities? How do the participants and their environment represent the involvement of people with reduced mobility in sports? What are the images constructed on the practice of handisport?

After having posed the problem and the research questions, the following part is devoted to the definition of the concept of social representations and to the presentation of the methodology.

### **Theoretical and Methodological Elements**

The idea of a concept can be defined according to Grawitz (1993) as "a rational representation comprising the essential attributes of a class of phenomenon or object". For Brunet et al (1993), a concept is "a general representation, of an abstract nature, clearly defined, and even consensual, likely to guide the research and to base its hypotheses". This research is based on the theory of social representations. In order to understand this field of study and to draw useful elements for this research, this part will be developed according to different aspects, namely the origin of social representations and the definition of the concept.

### **Origin of the concept of social representation**

The theory of social representations comes from the reflection in the field of social psychology. It is not a unified theory, but a set of theoretical perspectives that have emerged at the crossroads of sociology, anthropology and psychology. The idea of representation has been making its way into the field of sociology for over a century. It was the sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) who was the first to evoke the notion of representation - in order to explain various social phenomena - which he described as "collective consciousness". According to Durkheim, this "collective consciousness" is set up as a system that transcends social divisions. It imposes on the individual ways of thinking and acting, all of which materialize in social institutions as well as in the religious vision (Moliner, 1996; Bonardi and Roussiau, 1999; Jodelet, 1989).

Then, with the field of anthropology, Mauss (1872-1951) and Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009) will describe the first systems of collective representations in the traditional societies by taking however some distances with the theoretical conception of Durkheim. Indeed, Mauss will assert that the systems of collective representations are linked to individual dynamics and individual representations. For his part, Lévi-Strauss advocated the study of collective representations - complex social phenomena - on the basis of individual representations (Bonardi & Roussiau, 1999; Mcgee, & Warms, 2008).

### **Definition of the concept of social representation**

it is impossible of course to talk about representation without first addressing the notion of perception. Often confused with representation, a perception is, according to Grawitz (1994), "the function by which our mind forms a representation of external objects". In other words, perception is a knowledge of objects resulting from contact with them.

The acquisition of information by the mind is done through the senses. Perception is the intermediate stage between the object and its representation (Piaget and Inhelder, 1948).

Once imagined and associated with a related idea, it is then classified. This classification is possible because there has previously been an image/idea association that allows several objects and symbols to be related and compared. We can define social representation as "a specific form of knowledge, common sense knowledge, whose contents manifest the operation of socially marked generative and functional processes" (Jodelet, 1989). More broadly, it designates a form of social thought.

As mentioned by Jodelet (1984), "social representations are modalities of practical thought oriented towards communication, comprehension and control of the social, material and ideal environment". Garnier and Sauvé (1999) add that they are "a symbolic universe, culturally determined, where spontaneous theories, opinions, prejudices, decisions of action, etc. are forged".

Social representations constitute a form of knowledge, socially elaborated and shared, having a practical aim and contributing to the construction of a reality common to a social group (Jodelet, 1989; Moscovici, 1987). These "realities" can be of various kinds: material or intellectual, concrete or imaginary. They constitute a set of knowledge, beliefs, opinions and convictions, both personal and collective (Di Méo, 2008). A social representation is constructed, deconstructed, reconstructed, structured and evolves with the interaction of a subject with an object, while even this interaction is determined by the representation that the subject has about the object (Garnier & Sauvé, 1999). It is a dynamic, evolving structure, in permanent reconstruction under the influence of the conditioning and orientations emanating from our societies or our groups of belonging.

Social representations are forms of current knowledge known as "common sense". They are socially elaborated and shared and have a practical aim of organization and control of the environment. They orient behaviors and communications and contribute to the construction of a reality common to a group.

### **Research Methodology:-**

This research on the representations of sports practice of people with disabilities in the city of Saint-Louis is carried out more precisely in the Gaston BERGER University, which is a public institution in accordance with the rights and regulations of the State of Senegal in terms of education, teaching and research.

This structure is equipped with educational infrastructure (classrooms, lecture halls, research laboratories), an agricultural farm, a swimming pool, multifunctional sports halls, an accounting agency, a schooling, a medical service, restaurants, a regional center of university works for the social component (CROUS) and a large library.

Indeed, the UGB is a crossroads of cultures, its students coming from all over Senegal, and even in Africa constitute a cosmopolitan society. This crossbreeding has an impact on the way of life and the way of thinking of the students, hence our choice on this entity which has a handisport club which exists, but little known by the general public. The club is composed only of male and female students, and among them married people. Their trainings usually take place in the sports hall of the UGB.

### **Data collection technique**

This study relied on the semi-directive interview as a research technique to collect the speeches of the leaders of the practitioners, the coaches and the administrators of the handisport team of the Gaston BERGER University of Saint-Louis, in order to interpret the meaning, the images and the judgments that they have of the sport practice by people with disabilities, in order to meet the formulated objectives.

To this end, an interview guide was developed to collect detailed information essential to this study and twenty (20) people were interviewed. This guide includes four (4) themes, the first of which concerns the importance and the place of sports practice by people with disabilities in order to identify the elements of language emitted as well as the values and functions attributed to sports for people with disabilities. The second theme of the interview guide is interested in the perceptions and judgments of the actors and their close environment on the practice of sport by this social category. The objective is to analyse the two forms of discourse, the so-called indigenous discourse and that of others. The elements that can inform in this perspective are the construction or deconstruction of stereotypes.

The third theme of the interview guide focuses on the consequences of the judgments made by their relatives in terms of their impact on the discipline. The last theme of the interview guide focuses on the symbolic, religious and cultural aspects of the perceptions of sports practice by people with disabilities.

After conducting the interviews, we proceeded to the analysis in order to verify if the data will allow to corroborate the objectives of the research. In this perspective, we first proceeded to the data processing with the complete transcription of the twenty (20) interviews conducted. The interviews were conducted in "Wolof", which is one of the national languages spoken, and were translated and transcribed.

Following this, a summary table was used to capture the opinions of the interviewees and to summarize the information obtained from them with regard to each theme. In order to limit the tendency to be subjective when faced with a corpus of textual data, content analysis according to Moliner, Rateau and Cohen-Scali (2002) must be carried out using precise techniques (organization of the corpus, coding, breakdown, interpretation) that make it possible to improve the objectivity, systematization and generalization of the results presented below.

After outlining the methodology used to conduct this research, the following section presents the analysis and interpretation of the results collected.

### **Analysis and Interpretation of the Results**

#### **The practice of sport (handisport) is a space for personal development of the practitioner.**

For the participants, sport is a major asset to be in good health, because the sedentary lifestyle imposed by their condition is often likely to be a source of illness. For some people, their objective is not at all the search for profit, but rather a health goal. Among them, one subject said that :

I don't want to become a top athlete, but the health I get from my sport is more than enough for me.

Physical activity is considered as a key element of the well-being of the individual, whether he/she is physically, mentally or sensory handicapped, etc. The practice of sports has contributed a lot in their daily life, for some it has allowed them to get out of their little corner and anonymity to open up to other people and for others it has allowed them to discover themselves and to better appreciate themselves as they are without any embarrassment because if someone goes as far as to see himself as a champion, he/she can only have a great self-esteem. Thus, the practice of sport among people with disabilities is accompanied by a good self-esteem, a great self-confidence. Psychologically and in terms of autonomy, the benefits are also important. Sport helps to restructure their body image and improves their self-esteem,

I am a top athlete and I am very proud of myself. I am a champion and I feel good about myself as a sportsman because sport has freed me.

Maintaining a fit body in terms of health and fitness and developing self-esteem are issues for these people. Moreover, other representations are revealed by our research.

#### **The practice of sports (handisport) as a space for integration and the construction of sociability**

By practicing sports, people with disabilities manage to maintain relationships, to have much more solid considerations with the able-bodied. Some people say that "sometimes they are invited to certain sports events for able-bodied people to perform". The notion of integration is based on the principle of accepting the other with his or her differences. So the rapprochement with the able-bodied which the disabled benefit from through sport is in this dynamic of social integration. In their eyes, they are getting closer and closer to others. Indeed, sport is today one of the modalities of the social meeting all inside the components of the society. Sport not only helps to become aware of the other, but also allows him to take him into account.

Also, the integration of the participants of the UGB handisport club in sports competitions and the persistence of solidarity links maintained between participants outside the sports sphere, creates networks of exchanges, information, goods and services, as well as obligations and interdependence. The knowledge of these networks and their functioning allows to understand the existing system of relations, and which give to the handisport club of the UGB its true identity and its social significance.

Belonging to the same club, having the same rights and duties regardless of our differences, participating in competitions and exercising our rights are therefore elements that found and define integration. In this dimension, integration has to do with the public sphere and the different roles that the individual plays within it. This is a sociological reading of integration, as it deals with the individual's interest in participating in public life.

The practice of sports by people with disabilities has a real impact because it promotes integration into the group. It is a space where participative logics are developed as well as it favors new forms of sociability by the consolidation of social relations. It favors inter-practitioner communication and enhances human relations, as confirmed by this practitioner:

The establishment of a good practice atmosphere through organized competitions as well as the acquisition of different moral values such as solidarity, responsibility, autonomy and mutual aid.

These disabled people need a group such as the UGB handisport club to rebuild their identity through living together and the mix of cultures it encourages. The UGB handisport club can thus be considered as a system of norms and values that individuals will use when engaging in the activities of their choice. We can retain the idea that the handisport club of the UGB thus composed of (students, unemployed), and not only of subscribers is a modern institution in the sense that it participates in another framework to a certain "collectivization of life" AGULHON, M. (1978).

### **The practice of sports (handisport), a means of success and social promotion**

At this level, opinions are divided because if some practice sports for simple pleasure or in search of physical and sanitary gains, it must be said that others do so in search of well-being and with the aim of earning a living. According to the interviews we have conducted, more than half of the participants have social success as their objective. In fact, by joining the UGB's handisport club, the majority of the participants set themselves an objective that they want to achieve through sport, which suggests that sport becomes a means for the athletes to build and promote themselves.

Parents consider sport as a means of valorization and promotion in the Senegalese society. It is a serious thing that deserves a time investment. Sport has entered the sphere of social, economic and political relations. A new pole of excellence based on physical criteria is emerging in Senegalese society.

This status of sport in Senegalese society allows them to build an individual or collective project in which the regular practice of their physical and sports activity is part of. On the socio-professional level, their sport practice does not yet offer many opportunities to them.

They are not paid except for bonuses in case of selection to the national team. The practitioner acquires a place in the national life at a time when the Senegalese society secretes new forms of excellence. This father clearly states:

"I encourage and support my son who practices handisport. Thus, I help him to combine sports and studies".

However, at a time when the majority of participants in the UGB's handisport club have very high expectations of their sport and believe that they can succeed through their practice, some of the respondents declare that they have fears for their sport, citing the conditions of practice:

There is no suitable infrastructure. Even the road leading to the training room is defective, as well as the absence of talent detection allowing the programming of competitions which is itself a source of promotion of handisport.

This statement shows that the practitioners are aware of the status of their discipline in the space of sports but especially of the very difficult conditions of practice subject also to negative representations,

The financial means of the club are largely insufficient and most of the time the very expensive equipment we buy is imported or locally manufactured and of very defective quality.

Some of the members have a daily occupation which is not related to sport. They are not paid except for bonuses in case of selection to the national team. The practice of sport is valued by a great motivation on their part and a great

mobilization of the able-bodied which refers to self-determination. This motivation seems to be crucial for our subjects because it could not only allow them to live a better life while being aware of expectations, perspectives and even a know-how which will call upon a perceived competence.

We were able to observe that some disabled athletes consider the practice of handisport as a future profession. A means by which the individual can change his or her life and have a social status. People with disabilities have the same rights and duties as the so-called "able-bodied" and have the prerogative to participate in the life and organization of society, in this case the practice of sport.

Handisport is a means to obtain a social situation. Hence the dream of some would be to become a high level sportsman, as one subject states:

Handisport is above all a health matter for the person affected by the disability. I believe in sport and I know that I can succeed like able-bodied people.

Not only does the practice of sports give them health and well-being, but it also gives them a purpose in their lives, if they are able to do what "able-bodied" people do and earn titles like them. This practitioner calls on parents to take action:

All parents with disabled children who want to make a place for themselves in sports are obliged to give them this choice in life. Even if they do not become professionals, their health will be improved and their life fulfilled.

For some, a woman with a disability is doubly disabled, because she is first of all a woman. Compared to a man, she is judged not to be able to do what he is able to do. On the other hand, disability is seen as a physical reduction. This is why the practice of handisport for women is not very frequent.

### **Conclusion:-**

The attitudes, opinions, knowledge and values of individuals have a considerable impact on the adoption of practices in favour or not of disabled sport perceived as the sport practice of people with disabilities. Representations derive from a large number of factors, notably cultural and religious, education in terms of socialization modalities, motivations and constraints.

In the field of handisport, victim of stereotypes and stigmatization, the study of social representations was essential to understand the dynamics of the relationships between the main actors of this sport practice and their environment.

Generally speaking, the analysis shows that various social representations coexist within this population. Thus, the social representations of handisport in Senegal are evolving and differentiated according to the age, the nature of the handicap and the potential of the practitioner in the discipline. Moreover, they are directly related to the status of handisport in the national sports space and to the symbolic and material benefits that the discipline can offer to its practitioners.

Finally, the study reveals that the UGB handisport club does not constitute a label of excellence that allows the construction of a career plan and the promotion of people with disabilities in the Senegalese social space.

In fact, the UGB's handisport club is looking for a way to achieve sporting excellence and is trying to structure positive representations of its members and to contribute to reversing socially constructed representations.

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