

**Social participation experienced as "climbing up and rushing down a participation ladder".**

Kari Hjelte

*Bergen University College, Bergen, Norway*

**Purpose.** To explore how people with disability experience participation in society. Another aim is to increase understanding of the concept of participation in the International Classification of Functioning (ICF). **Method.** Six people with disability participated in qualitative focus group discussion. The data was analysed following the guidelines for the constant comparative method. **Results.** Three main categories emerged as the participants' experiences of participation in society. 'Being engaged' captured being engaged in one's own and other people's lives, and being engaged in the fight for disabled people's rights. 'Being part of society' captured being equal, being valued in the same way as everybody else, being included and having the freedom to choose. 'Social interaction influencing participation' identified interacting with citizens and interacting with urban planners. **Conclusions.** The category of 'climbing up and sliding down the participation ladder' is a picture of the dynamic interaction between intrapersonal, interpersonal, and environmental factors that operate together to limit or enhance participation in society for people with disability. The dynamic interplay between personal and environmental factors is in line with the ICF biopsychosocial model. In the ICF, activity and participation are combined in one dimension, and this can lead to participation gaining an individual rather than a biopsychosocial perspective. This may be an argument for separating activity and participation into two dimensions, i.e. to render more visible the fact that participation is related to environmental, as well as to personal, factors.

**Keywords:** social participation, citizens, participation ladder, ICF, focus group