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Social Participation in Theory and Practice – The perspectives of persons with a spinal cord injury

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Introduction: What counts as valuable social participation is not just a personal matter, but also defined by norms ideologies and power relations in different social domains and social relations in society.

Objective: The aim of this paper is to explore the concept of social participation based on the experiences of persons with a spinal cord injury in Norway.

Method: The material is based on 31 in-depth interviews and was analysed using qualitative content analysis (MAXQDA) combined with an in-depth analysis of each interview.

Results: The informants' understanding of participation is primarily associated with activity, socializing and the freedom to live an active and normal life. The importance of normality, having a job and deviating from "people in general" are seen as the primary narratives among those interviewed. The informants also emphasise the importance of social recognition, human rights and making a contribution to society.

Practice Implications: The answers reveal a stronger social dimension and agency perspective than appears in the International Classification of Functioning Disability and Health (ICF). They also show a more complex picture of social identities and participation roles than in the ICF. Instead of a narrative comparing the disabled to the non-disabled, a complex set of social relations and identities are found in the Norwegian interviews.

Conclusion: It is essential that we pay attention to the voices of persons with a disability, but equally important that we study social participation in a realistic framework of different social domains and forms of social relations in society.