

Wheelchair Basketball Teams as “Second Families” in Highland Ecuador
Nicholas Rattray
University of Arizona

Abstract: This paper examines the concept of second families as social networks that complement primary families as forms of social support and identity formation. Based on analysis of narratives of three wheelchair basketball players, I argue that second families play a crucial role in the performance of masculinity and personal development for physically disabled men.

Keywords: disability, Ecuador, athletics

Introduction

If you arrived around dusk on a weeknight at the *Coliseo Jefferson Perez*, an indoor sports area in the Ecuadorian city of Cuenca, you might find a group of wheelchair basketball players warming up. Most of these athletes drive their own cars to the stadium parking lot. They lift themselves out of the front seat, maneuver around to the back of the vehicle and get into their wheelchairs. Most players have two chairs: their everyday chair and one adapted to play sports. To enter into the arena, the athletes traverse a heavy wooden ramp laid over the stairs that leads to the court level. Like any athletes, they engage in elaborate preparatory rituals. Some players painstakingly wrap their hands in white athletic tape yet most play with their well-calloused, bare hands. Others warm up by practicing turns, stops, and accelerations. The athletes in Cuenca range in age from early twenties to approaching fifty. Each player has varying levels of ability to push their chairs, dribble and shoot the basketball, and execute offensive and defensive plays.

For many of these Ecuadorian men, playing wheelchair basketball has been a crucial way of making sense of the experience of living with a physical disability. I met several members of the wheelchair basketball team in 2008 during fieldwork with disabled communities in highland Cuenca. Norberto, an artisan in his thirties who made folk art for the tourist trade, reported that joining the basketball team helped him recover from an injury suffered after falling from the second story of a building. For Francisco, learning to play basketball encouraged him to seek out formal employment in Cuenca. After being injured in a mining accident, through the help of his family Francisco recovered and secured a job in a factory. While most of the men found themselves playing basketball after debilitating injuries, some like Enrique had congenital disabilities. Born with shortened legs and no feet, he was paralyzed from birth and transported himself using a skateboard.

In this paper, I analyze how adaptive sports like wheelchair basketball have helped to reconfigure the subjectivities of disabled men. Examining “subjects” implies a specific emphasis on how people define themselves through social encounters, conscious use of their body, and in relation to wider cultural forces (Biehl, Good, & Kleinman, 2007, p. 9). I argue that the basketball arena represents a place where they can redefine their masculinity, maintain an active lifestyle, and acquire social capital. Drawing from the embodied narratives of wheelchair users in highland Ecuador,¹ I explore how joining the basketball team has transformed their relationships to their primary families and reshaped their masculinities as fathers, sons, and providers. In

addition to challenging prevailing stereotypes about masculinity and disability, I argue that for these men, playing wheelchair basketball connects them to an important social network that they call their *segunda familia* (second family). *Segunda familias* (also called *segunda casas* or second homes) play an important role in identity construction and social relations that complement natal relationships. I refer to primary families as units comprised of natal and extended kin relationships.

The individuals that I have highlighted are drawn from a broader set of data collected with disabled athletes in Cuenca. I had numerous conversations with these men in addition to recorded and transcribed interviews. In reflecting on the meanings and social status of disabled men, these men narrated ideas ranging from their family roles as providers to surmounting many of the challenges facing disabled Ecuadorians. One common theme discussed was that playing wheelchair sports disrupts cultural expectations that are often attached to individuals with physical disabilities. As in other parts of the world, in Ecuador disability is commonly viewed as a tragic loss, a solely medical condition, and in static terms. The athletes I met in Cuenca disrupt popular notions of disability by demanding access to public spaces, whether through playing in local sports facilities or eating at restaurants. In doing so, they project disability identity as a source of pride, and as a normative, ordinary existence. Furthermore, they epitomize new social roles embodied by disabled athletes -- capable workers, mobile citizens, breadwinners, competitive athletes.

My analysis of the narratives of Ecuadorian wheelchair athletes brings together a disability studies framework that emphasizes the social and cultural construction of bodily differences within the context of limited economic resources, a virtual absence of the state, and significant social hierarchies. Anthropologists recognize that ethnographic research can shape new “public narratives” around disability (Rapp & Ginsburg, 2001), and some emphasize the diverse strategies of survival for those who lives are undervalued by society (Biehl & Moran-Thomas, 2009, p. 281). In the case of wheelchair athletes and many other disabled Ecuadorians, the impetus to join new groups is not necessarily based on similar physiological impairments. Disabled Ecuadorians have turned to groups as a source of support and social capital due to the absence of effective rehabilitation and medical services, limited employment opportunities, and the difficulties of managing impairment among natal households. They come together because they share the public identity of living with a visible disability and the technological usage of wheelchairs. In other words, what is shared is corporeal rather than biological. While disabled Ecuadorians continue to face persistent social exclusion, I demonstrate how these athletes have collectively shaped local perceptions of disability through their actions.

Disability and Embodied Narratives

Analytical categories like “disability” or “family” depend on historical, political, and geographic contexts. Anthropologists in particular have focused on the narrative analysis of chronic illness and disability to draw attention to wider cultural practices connecting health, illness and the body (Das & Das, 2007; Frank, 2000; Ingstad & Whyte, 1995, 2007; Mattingly & Garro, 2000). Those taking a comparative approach have focused on how meanings of disability are contingent on broader cultural systems of bodily and behavioral differences (Davis, 2000; Shuttleworth, 2004). While the first wave of disability studies was heavily influenced by a distinction between the

causes (biological anomalies) and consequences of impairments (disability), there has been wider acknowledgement that the social aspects of disability can never be separated from corporeal concerns (Shuttleworth & Kasnitz, 2004; Tremain, 2002) and issues of embodied differences (Titchkosky, 2003, pp. 23-24).

In Ecuador, up until the 1990s', the state had little involvement in the lives of families with disabled individuals (Cazar Flores, Molina Yépez, & Moreno Pramatárova, 2005; CONADIS, 2006)² even though developing countries like Ecuador, actually produce impairments at a higher rate due to poverty and lack of social capital (Grech, 2008; Staples, 2011, p. 548). The relative absence of the state created the conditions for the emergence of new social groups. My analysis examines how constructions of gender and performance play a key role in understanding how bodily differences intersect with the cultural meanings of families and ancillary social networks (Das & Addlakha, 2001). As in other parts of Latin America, these stories illustrate how disabled men are subject to gendered expectations around virility, earning a livelihood, and heading households (Gutmann, 1997; Pribilsky, 2007). In particular, "embodied narratives" (Hyden & Antelius, 2011) offer a framework for understanding how disability is performed and enacted beyond what is said through interviews or social interaction. Thus, I analyze how these wheelchair athletes moved, reflected on their own gestures and movements, and viewed their teammates. For athletes who have had to learn new ways of using their body, theories of performance and gender construction are particularly useful (Smith & Sparkes, 2005). Disability studies scholars have suggested that narrative approaches to understanding disability have been supplemented by accounts written by parents of children with disabilities, which overlap and diverge in meaningful ways from first-person accounts (P. Ferguson & Asch, 1989, p. 111). I extend disability studies scholarship by honing in on the public and embodied aspects of disability narratives.

The Interplay of Primary and Secondary Families in Highland Ecuador

Stigma, shame, and pity are important themes that have been historically associated with visible impairment and chronic illnesses in Ecuador. Disabled Ecuadorians has often been described as *escondido* (hidden) and *abandonado* (abandoned) (Torres Dávila, 2004). As in other parts of Latin America, many disabled individuals spend the majority of their life at home (Aptekar 1983). The presence of a person with an impairment often generates discomfort for people because a person's disability is linked to the idea that they are contaminated or abnormal (Goffman 1963); as such, disabled individuals may be "regarded as objects of sociological danger and treated with avoidance or fear" (Scheer and Groce 1988: 32). Many informants described that their physical impairment had been perceived as something that makes them permanently ill or contagious. Disability has been associated with shame in part because it has been thought to be a tragedy, deserving of pity or charity. The circulation of negative discourses around disability discourages Ecuadorian families with disabled members from being publicly involved in community life (Miranda-Galarza, 2009).

Through interviewing and playing with wheelchair athletes in Cuenca, I came to understand how they attempt to collectively dispel many of these popular cultural assumptions about disability. In 2008, I conducted twelve continuous months of ethnographic fieldwork, primarily with members of two nonprofit community organizations with the objective of

understanding issues of citizenship, accessibility, and disability in highland Ecuador (Ratray, 2012). I collected qualitative data through participant-observation and semi-structured interviews with thirty disabled individuals. I would like to note that my positionality undoubtedly shaping the research findings. My status as an American male researcher of European descent helped me approach these organizations as foreigners often receive favorable receptions in Cuenca. Since I do not identify as a person with a disability, it was important to establish credibility. Explaining my experience working as a personal attendant and conducting research on accessibility and disability (Ratray 2007) helped me establish rapport. Interviews I conducted with Enrique, Francisco, and Norberto were between 45-90 minutes. These interviews were recorded and transcribed, and were supplemented by field notes.

Midway through my fieldwork, I was invited to watch a basketball practice. When I first arrived, I took pictures and assisted preparing the players court for practice. They immediately invited me to mount a wheelchair and play since they were short one player. Overcoming my initial hesitation – playing seemed to violate my assumption that able-bodied people did not play – I ended up participating on several occasions. The team has a weekly schedule of practices. While the practices consisted mostly of “pick-up” style scrimmages, several players have represented the regional team in intra-national competitions. About half the players are on the Azuay Province team and compete in national competitions.

My interviews with the players covered a wide range of topics that began with sports but included disability rights, accessibility, migration, and even the normally taboo topic of sexual relations among disabled people (Earle, 1999; Shuttleworth, 2001). During interviews, I discovered that many players referred to the team as their “second family.” The team provided a critical outlet for men struggling to earn a living and form social bonds outside of their natal families. Many players felt that participating generated feelings of belonging, comfort, and confidence, and often cited *compañerismo* (friendship) as most important aspect of their involvement. Second families play an important role in the meaning of masculinity in the primary families as I show in the following discussion of the three players with which I began: Norberto, Enrique, and Francisco.

Embodied Masculinities among Wheelchair Athletes

Garland-Thomson (2007) suggests that stories of disabled athletes can offer counter-narratives to “personal tragedy” or “pity” themes in popular discourse. In analyzing how male athletes make meaning of their roles on the US Wheelchair Rugby portrayed in the film *Murderball* (Shapiro & Rubin, 2005), Garland Thomson calls our attention to the “ultra-masculinity” performed by men with ideal bodies for the sport, with a storyline that “disability can provide a meaningful life in which ones thrives rather than languishes” (Garland-Thomson 2007: 115). While such storylines can be misleading in that they offer simplistic explanations for what constitutes a meaningful life, most of the basketball players subscribed to the idea that playing sports enabled them to challenge the expectations of people around them. From the limited sample from which I drew from of approximately seventy-five research participants, a much higher proportion of athletes than non-athletes drove cars, were employed, and had a spouse or children. Without suggesting a causal link, it is important to note than many athletes emphasized that central importance that sports had played in their success Most drove

themselves to the arena and engaged in either formal or informal employment, which stands in contrast to the eighty percent of disabled Ecuadorians estimated to be unemployed (Cazar Flores, et al., 2005).

Transformations in the meaning of family were apparent in my discussion with Norberto, the artisan whose family lives on the outskirts of Cuenca. He described his family as *campesinos*, whose main livelihood is agricultural production. I came to know Norberto first through his participation in a local disability advocacy organization. Norberto later invited me to wheelchair basketball practice, encouraged me to interview the players, and typically gave me a ride to and from the arena. Norberto's story indicates the importance that sports can play in performing masculinity, including the expected duties of raising children, providing income, and transporting members of the household.

Norberto's narrative shifted from feelings of dependency after his accident to loss and normalization, a trend that was common to many individuals with disabilities I spoke with in Cuenca. Norberto's life objectives shifted in response to an injury he experienced when he fell from the second story of a building when he was 21. His girlfriend, who was pregnant at the time of the accident, could not handle the dual pressure of caring for a baby and a paraplegic partner, so they split up. With a subdued voice, Norberto said that when his daughter was born, he felt as though he had been "stabbed," since he was unable to start a family. Subsequently, he realized that it was "nobody's fault." After his injury he went through a period of transition that included mourning and depression, followed by healing. Norberto realized he would need to make use of available adaptive technologies in order to live a full life. After an unsuccessful trip to Quito where government agency staff treated him as if he had a mental, not physical impairment, Norberto ceased trying to secure benefits from the state. Instead, he used money sent from his brother working abroad in the United States to adapt his truck so that he could drive with just his hands. Norberto eventually accepted his new state of being, explaining that his life post-injury was "no worse than before, just different."

In terms of recovery, Norberto claimed that playing wheelchair basketball has been the most important factor. "What I'm trying to tell you, Nico," he explained, "is that it has been the best rehabilitation I found in my life, you know? To see friends, play basketball, even the pressure I feel to attend practice is the best rehab, really the only therapy." Wheelchair basketball helped him more than either psychological approaches or traditional physical rehabilitation. "The therapy that has been best for me, by far, has been basketball and it has given me the desire to live." He credits basketball with improving his physical range of motion and muscle strength, but prizes it most for improving his mental outlook on life. By 2008, Norberto was working at home crafting wooden figurines to be sold in the tourist market and was planning the construction of a home with zero-grade entrances, wide bathroom doors, and a generally open architecture that would make using a wheelchair much easier. His new house represents the culmination of his vision for self-care: accessible design, family-oriented, and mostly self-sufficient. Norberto had fulfilled much of what was expected of him as an Ecuadorian man. Although he was supported in part by US dollars sent home by his brother, he also had a paying job, a wife and children, (McKee, 1980). He had "run the household" since his brother has migrated to the United States (*El Otro Lado*).³ His suffering has not been seen as an individual issue, and has instead been managed and ameliorated by the household as a whole (c.f. Staples, 2011).

Strategic Embodiments

Enrique, an Afro-Ecuadorian man in his mid-thirties, found that joining the wheelchair basketball team created new opportunities for social networking and support. Compared to other basketball players, Enrique took a less common route to providing for his family: he panhandled each day from eight in the morning to four in the afternoon on a busy street corner in Cuenca. Enrique's narrative demonstrates how flexible forms of embodiment offer avenues for participating in primary and secondary families. After a few months in Cuenca, I initiated a friendly relationship that involved casual chatting as he solicited money on the street. Enrique often greeted me by saying, "Hey, amigo, how have you been?" in a heavy, sing-song accent common in this part of Ecuador, vigorously shaking my hand.

Enrique was a recognized fixture in Cuenca's downtown area, known to sit on a skateboard and solicit money from cars and pedestrians at a busy intersection. My acquaintances suggested that Enrique's presence was unique due to his outgoing personality in a city known for reserved, formal social conventions. Enrique was both without feet and had dark skin, which made him stand out in a city with very few Afro-Ecuadorians (less than 3% of residents). As Enrique pushes himself along the narrow sidewalks and intersections with thickly gloved hands, he transgresses deep-rooted physical and social barriers that shape daily life for most Ecuadorians with disabilities. I have argued that beyond the impropriety of begging from street, Enrique's display of a highly visible impairment defies a local norm in Cuenca where disability is encouraged to be hidden (Rattray, in press).

I had mistakenly assumed that Enrique used a skateboard because he could not afford a wheelchair, in part since he had explained his marginal income. Enrique also assumed that in my research, I was solely working formal disability advocacy organized. Thus, when we both arrived at a wheelchair basketball practice one day, we were both a little bit surprised. I had no idea that Enrique also played on the team, and Enrique told me that he found it strange that I had tracked down the basketball players. Enrique clearly stood out as one of the best basketball players on the team and was extremely adept in his wheelchair.

After a few practices with the team, I sat down with Enrique one evening to ask him more questions about his experience, his background, and how he makes a living. Enrique, 37, and was born in the Esmeraldas province, on the Ecuadorian coast. Most of his extended family lives in Quito, but he had lived in Cuenca for twelve years. His wife lives in Guayaquil, where his daughter attends school. The money Enrique earns begging helps pay for his wife and daughter's housing expenses, which total \$12.60 each month for their cane house. Enrique's situation differs from many of his fellow wheelchair basketball players for a number of reasons. One key difference is that Enrique was born with his disability, and thus did not need rehabilitation. Accordingly, he learned from a young age how to navigate through life with a highly visible impairment. Enrique told me that using a skateboard (*patineta*) allows him to go places easier, interact with people in cars, and makes it possible to navigate damaged sidewalks. Enrique depicted his life as a "*lucha diaria*," or a daily struggle. "It's not easy to get out of bed each day not knowing how much I will earn," he said in describing how uncertainty clouds his life. While panhandling has enabled him to support his family in the absence of government benefits or

other outside assistance, the necessity of begging all day presents an unending challenge. He dreams of owning a small store somewhere close to his wife and daughter in Guayaquil and completing a wood roof for their cane house.

Enrique had never used a wheelchair before he joined the basketball team. He described how he first joined the team:

When I was first invited to play, I knew nothing about basketball, didn't know anyone and really I had never hung out with other disabled people. But when I got here, I was amazed to see them play, how much fun they were having, and it was such a great experience. I thought 'If they can, then I can too.' When I first tried, I fell about 50 times, and stayed away for a while but now I am part of the team.

Playing basketball had been a revelation in terms of the way Enrique envisions his social life. The most important aspect of the team has been forging close friendships with other players. A few years earlier, he finished in first place in Ecuador's Paralympic swimming competition and third place in wheelchair track, but was unable to travel to the South American championships due to lack of funds. Enrique pointed out that because other athletes had connections (*palancas*) or benefactors (*padrinos*) that he lacked, they were able to finance their travel in ways he could not.

Another difference between Enrique and his peers is his social status. Unable to procure steady work, he has panhandled on the street throughout his adult life. Enrique's roots in the coastal province of Esmeraldas and his African heritage differ from the other players, most of who identify as Mestizos from different parts of southern Ecuador. Even though he is a cherished member of the wheelchair basketball team, Enrique adopts a different presentation of self in the street that helps him make a living in the competitive informal system of street begging in Cuenca. His shiny, blue, high performance wheelchair would likely make him seem less needy in the street. To make a living in the street on a skateboard, he has learned to alter his role from athlete to street beggar through shifting his mode of transport, self-presentation, and attitude.

Enrique's story was one among several instances I documented where the absence of job opportunities or support from the state, many disabled men seek a wide range of tactics for providing for their family. While the only one who panhandled, others sold lottery tickets, candies, or other items in the informal economy to make ends meet. Although Enrique was not originally from Cuenca, he had been able to find a niche making a living in the street that has enabled him connect with his family members across Ecuador. The wheelchair basketball team is a social network that offers a safety net and a means for Enrique to maintain meaningful friendships in the context of a life preoccupied with daily survival.

Rehabilitation and Disability Identity

Learning to play basketball offered individuals like Enrique and Norberto new opportunities to join a community and redefine how they think about themselves. I suggest that disabled identity is enacted through the cultural training that takes place through embodied practices, or what Manderson terms "rehabilitation" (2011, p. 96). In contrast to rehabilitation,

rehabilitation focuses holistically on how one's *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977; Mauss, 1973) must be newly constituted following an accident, injury or other bodily disruption as well as the incompleteness and extended duration of recovery.

Many of the Ecuadorian basketball players reported that basketball transformed the way they thought. Many embodied the “maverick” mentality described in *Murderball*, and were able to translate assertive attitudes into other arenas of their lives. These athletes explained asserting their right to patronize bars and restaurants, access services, and apply for jobs with pride. They narrated instances where they intentionally transgressed boundaries of space or social conventions in order to claim their rights.

Many of the transformations necessary to inhabit maverick subjectivities were inculcated gradually over a period of years. I suggest that these athletes have adapted to a new sense of normality in part by learning new ways of their bodies through a combination of adaptive technology and corporeal retraining. Although a few athletes I met had congenital disabilities, the majority had suffered some type of accident. The arduous process of rehabilitation necessary to learn how to efficiently and quickly locomote with a wheelchair was sped up by wheelchair basketball and provided a foundation of motor and social skills necessary to live an independent life as a disabled adult in Cuenca. Even those with congenital disabilities like Enrique acquired new habits and mentalities associated with being a wheelchair athlete.

The role played by primary and secondary families in rehabilitation was most clear in the narrative of Francisco, a low-key younger member of the basketball team. While his natal family played a key role in his initial recovery, the basketball team became his most important social network. Francisco's journey from working in a mine to playing basketball and being employed at a local factory helps illustrate how recovery from injury took place without public assistance.

Over beer and plantain chips, Francisco and I spoke about how he came to live in Cuenca and play wheelchair basketball. Francisco was unmarried, 30, and was from the countryside but had lived in Cuenca for several years. Francisco was working as a miner in a rural province of coastal Ecuador when an accident occurred. His team was drilling for a vein of gold with a massive drill when a large slab of rock fell from the roof. They later told him that over two and half tons had crushed his legs. After riding for two hours on a mattress in the back of a pickup truck, Francisco found himself alone and dealing with various doctors. “They came and the doctors told me that the operation was dangerous – not dangerous but that they couldn't guarantee anything – I may or may be able to walk again.” From that point on, Francisco felt ashamed and depressed, and did not want to tell his family. After a few days, the doctors forced him to call his aunt. The doctors in a nearby town told them that they could perform an operation for thirty million *sucres* (around USD \$8500 at the time) just for the operation, and since his extended family lived in Cuenca, two weeks later they brought him to a clinic. The doctors in Cuenca gave him a more realistic assessment:

They said that I would never walk again and that I would have to search for work in a wheelchair. That was the last straw – imagine that you can't take care of yourself but instead

have to spend your life depending on others. It killed me to hear this, I literally wanted to die for about three or four months while I was disappointed and confused about what I should do. But, with the considerable help of my family and my brother, little by little I was able to overcome until now where I am today. I am as I am, thanks to the Lord, things have been alright and that which I wanted, I have had. I didn't want to know anything, I wanted to disappear for a year – well, the first three months were the worst, but then I began to adapt because it was a whole new way of living, totally different to depend on the wheelchair, depend on others. I spent each and every day for while learning how to move again.

Francisco's response to a debilitating injury involved shock and despair, but eventually he developed a sense of acceptance and a new set of life expectations. As in many narratives from those who acquire disabilities, there is a trajectory that starts with life before the accident, a period of liminality that includes the fear of an existence consisting of dependence on others, and a resolution that entails a transformed sense of self (Antelius, 2009; Murphy, 1987). Following his move to Cuenca, Francisco gradually created what he considers to be an independent life. Francisco described joining the wheelchair basketball team as the "best form of therapy," and credited it with helping him recover physically and psychologically from his injury, much like Norberto.

Following Francisco's injury, he was considered disposable and unemployable. The financial burden of medical operations and recovery was borne by his family, not the state or the mining company. Yet Francisco was one of the few disabled people I met with formal employment. He had worked for the six prior years as a skilled laborer in a factory making parts for refrigerators, from seven in the morning to six at night. Hired as part of the firm's compliance with a recent law that requires any business with over twenty-five employees to have at least one disabled employee, Francisco felt fortunate to have a steady job. Although he admitted feeling like a token worker employed to fit a quota and avoid a tax liability, he felt relieved to be working again and living a more or less independent life. In prior eras, he probably would not have worked again, and perhaps would be permanently a "non-productive body" (Mitchell & Snyder, 2010, p. 184), with a body unfit for formal employment. One important lesson to draw from Francisco's experience rests on how his participation in a collective group of athletes has broken norms about acceptable behavior at a local factory where his employers have been forced to reconsider inaccessible aspects of their workplace alongside stereotypes about the capabilities of wheelchair users.

Francisco's process of rehabilitation took several years. When he moved from the country-side to Cuenca, he was able to advance socially because he was able to avail himself of more medical services, social supports, more accessible physical environments, and more open attitudes toward disability. More than most athletes, Francisco's connection to his natal family had diminished since the period in which he had intensive medical care and recovery. In recent years, the basketball team served as his key site for social support and connections. While he aspires to start a new family of his own, his more immediate goals center on saving money from his factory job so that he can try to compete in national competitions for the wheelchair basketball team.

Narrating Families through Disabled Athletes

Carefully interpreted stories about disability as embedded within families and social networks can reveal insights into contemporary cultural practices (P. M. Ferguson, 2002, p. 129). Second families, like the one formed by the wheelchair basketball team, play a crucial role in the lives of the disabled men I met in Ecuador and their collective stories illustrate how the experience of playing wheelchair basketball has helped these athletes conceive of themselves as capable, active men. Thus, transformations taking place through involvement with second families has reshaped their role within their primary families. While I have focused here on athletics, other narratives of second homes or families were prevalent among individuals associated with community-based organizations in Cuenca.

As I witnessed while riding in Norberto's truck as he gave Enrique a late-night ride home, the team has also brought together people who otherwise may never have met and become friends. The team builds on a mostly unspoken set of common experiences around living with a disability to cultivate the personal development of its members. Participation in wheelchair sports provides a crucial site to negotiate the tensions between shame associated with bodily difference and the gendered enactment of familial roles. The narratives of Norberto, Francisco, and Enrique, show the limitations in approaching disability experiences from the perspective of individualized perspectives that emphasize rehabilitation or biomedical models.

Disabled athletes help us think about subjectivities that may have been difficult to imagine in prior eras. I have shown how disabled men have challenged received assumptions about their abilities to care for their family and earn a living. However, I have also argued against simply reducing the activities of wheelchair athletes as promoting counter-narratives against orthodox ideologies about disability. Men like those discussed in this article engage in complex strategies that enable them to both transgress and fulfill roles expected of them as Ecuadorian fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons. Sports have enabled new ways to negotiate the substantial cultural, spatial, and economic barriers facing these individuals.

Nick Rattray is an adjunct professor of anthropology at Indiana University, Bloomington interested in embodiment, health disparities, and space.

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End Notes

¹ I conducted twelve months of in-depth, ethnographic fieldwork in the city of Cuenca in 2008, with shorter trips in 2006 and 2010. Of the approximately fifty research participants, interviews were audio-taped and transcribed with thirty disabled individuals among three groups: a regional association of people with disabilities, an organization of visually impaired individuals, and wheelchair athletes.

² People with disabilities make up roughly one in eight Ecuadorians (Cazar Flores, et al., 2005). Of these 1.6 million citizens, forty percent have severe impairments. Only one in ten people with disabilities receives any type of support from institutions, public or private, in Ecuador (Cazar Flores, et al., 2005). Government reports also indicate that half of all people with disabilities fall into the bottom two income quintiles, meaning that they survive on less than thirty dollars per month. These statistics underscore the limited economic resources available to households with disabled family members.

³ It is common in the Azuay-Cañari region for households to have at least one family member in the United States or Spain. It is estimated that one in three households have at least one family member abroad (Borrero Vega & Vega Ugalde, 1995). Remittances often help make up higher cost of having a disabled or aging family member.
