SPORTS AND PARTICIPATION

PARKOUR GROUP ZURICH

Brief description

Parkour is a method of physical training that develops one's ability to overcome obstacles (both physical and mental). It is a practice of moving through a – typically – urban setting to get from a start point to an end point as efficiently as possible. This involves physically overcoming barriers on any given route, creating inventive but practical ways to use the city's infrastructure. In contrast to other PARTISPACE cases, the activities in the case of the Parkour training group under study always take place in the public urban space. Therefore, (public urban) space has a special meaning and importance in this case study. Another interesting aspect of this case is that the Parkour training group is part of a private limited company, which is part of an international network. Training sessions are fee-based. The participants are aged between 12 and (approximately) 35 years and therefore, cover a wide age range. The trainer of the group is in his early twenties. The training group of as many as 14 participants meets twice a week in different locations in the center of the city of Zurich for two-hour training sessions. As there is a limit of how many individuals can participate there is currently a long waiting list. The training sessions are based on a training concept that has been developed and certified by the company. Every month subjects and techniques related to parkour are selected by the trainer which are then practiced and reflected. The training sessions are held outdoor in summer and winter regardless of the weather.

What we have learned about participation

An individual bodily practice or discipline is readily seen as transferable to work or school settings

Parkour can be understood as a form of individual self-expansion. This self-expansion is made possible by means of the strenuous practice of techniques of spatial and self-conquest. The training can be described as strenuous in the sense that traceurs (parkour practitioners) do not always find the parkour sessions to be easy. Negative thoughts, for example fear while balancing on a railing or uncertainty whether one will be able to leap far enough, are to be overcome in a relaxed manner. Through the strenuous practice of spatial and self-conquest, psychological and physical limits as well as limits in the environment are eliminated or overcome. In this sense, it is possible to speak of parkour as a manner of defying limits, as the basic philosophy or principle of eliminating psychological, physical and material limits is not only practiced and tested in the training sessions but also applied to such empirical settings as school or the workplace. One participant remarks that *"without parkour […] life would be more difficult" (Gustav, Zurich, GD)*.

Participation can involve dedication and result in self-empowerment

Parkour guides participants through the city and extends their sensory perceptions. It requires endurance, stamina and willpower and helps traceurs accept many discomforts. Parkour also enables practitioners to *"behave in an adult way" (Gustav, Zurich, GD)* and augments self-confidence and determination. In this way *"parkour extends to absolutely all aspects of life" (Petra, Zurich, GD)*. Various participants report in the group discussion, for example, that they have become less shy, that their school performance has improved and that they have become more active but are in a continual process of development and learning. At the center of the training group stands a framework-defining trainer personality, who is not just a role model for the (aspiring) traceurs but also serves to provide a basic structure, embodying the unchallenged or unchallengeable training principles and repeatedly insisting that these principles be respected. Training principles include continual improvement in performance, reflection after the completion of an exercise, mutual respect and support as well as compliance with rules. The trainer encourages and praises the participants and is an essential figure for them.

Key Challenges Identified

There is a fee and it is personality dependent: a kind of calling seems necessary. Traceurs do leave fleeting traces behind in so far as their activities can be observed in public urban spaces. In the city traceurs can be briefly perceived, for example, if a passer-by suddenly sees someone balancing on a railing or a parkour group climbing stairs using the "spider crawl" technique. Passers-by are usually astonished for a moment, wonder perhaps what the group is doing, but then quickly move on from the practice location. The fleetingness of the parkour activity generally prevents any use conflicts from taking place, so that there is very little public annoyance. However, it may also leave it set apart from any more universal/general attempts to frame democratic participation.