**QRSE Conference 2014: Loughborough University**

**“Turning point moments in the field”**

**Title: (Dis)ability by design: Narratives of bodily perfectionism amongst wheelchair athletes**

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Excluding a few notable exceptions, there is a dearth of empirically based research exploring how disabled athletes construct and negotiate senses of embodied identity. Taking this into consideration, we draw on data generated from a four year ethnographic study into wheelchair sport in England to examine the ways in which disabled athletes engage in self-reflexive “body projects” (Shilling, 1993) in making strong personal statements about their identity amongst contemporary cultures that idealise the ‘body beautiful’. A structural narrative analysis of the ‘big’ and ‘small’ stories (Bamberg, 2006) told by disabled athletes in the field revealed two dominant ‘body projects’ in action. Firstly*,* in developing *malleable bodies* participants altered the comportment of their bodies either conservatively by building muscle and losing body fat or more radically through desiring amputation of impaired body parts. Secondly, in engaging in tattooing and piercing practices, participants artfully constructed *modified bodies****,***affording control and expression over identity in a number of ways. Findings suggest that disabled athletes embodied identities should not be thought of as singular, homogeneous, passive, and static but should be better seen as plural, heterogeneous, active, and evolving. Reflections are provided that question if identity construction in disability sport is policed by ableist discourse encouraging participants to reject their ‘flawed’ bodies and align themselves to the carnal norms of non-disabled people (Hughes and Paterson, 1999), or if disabled athletes are able to demonstrate agency by proudly creating more empowering senses of identity that subvert the “non-disabled gaze” challenging contemporary tyrannies of bodily perfectionism.