**Leeds Metropolitan University**

**Sporting Females: past, present and future 2014**

**Title: (Dis)ability sport as an opportunity for empowerment or a reproduction of gender stereotypes? A life history of a female Paralympian**

**Authors:**

* **James Brighton** (Canterbury Christ Church University)
* **Andrew C. Sparkes** (Research Institute for Sport, Physical Activity and Leisure, Leeds Metropolitan University)

**Abstract:**

Participation in (dis)ability sport is male dominated (DePauw and Gavron, 2005) and in spite of a few notable exceptions (Dashpner, 2010; Peers, 2012), academic analyses in this area has failed to listen to the voices of female athletes themselves in enlightening the construction and negotiation of athletic identity. Drawing on data generated from a wider four year ethnographic study into wheelchair sport in England we illuminate the experiences of Jenny, who after acquiring a spinal cord injury (SCI) in a car crash aged 17, became a two time Paralympian in wheelchair rugby and athletics. Taking a life history approach, we narrate Jenny’s journey from the rehabilitation clinic to professional athlete and fully fledged ‘supercrip’. In doing so, we outline on the pressures she faces embodying the ‘double bind’ minority status of being both (dis)abled and a woman (Hardin and Hardin, 2005) in relation to: 1) how she constructs her gendered and sexed identity in hegemonic masculine sporting environments 2) how she negotiates the tense relationships between (dis)ability and contemporary ideologies of feminine bodily perfection and 3) her responses to medicalising and sexualising media representations of her ‘supercrip’ identity. Reflections are provided that reveal the oppression female athletes are faced with in overtly dispelling dominant stereotypes of both (dis)ability and femininity. We argue that although participation and excellence in sport can be empowering, providing (dis)abled women opportunity for physical, social, emotional, and economic benefit, it is also dangerous, contributing to narrowly defined understandings of the self and reinforcing dominant gender/sex ideologies.

**Short biographies:**

**James** is a Lecturer in the Sociology of Sport and Exercise at Canterbury Christ Church University and is in the final year of his PhD under the supervision of Professor Andrew Sparkes (Leeds Metropolitan University). His research interests are in (dis)ability sport, cyborg theory, and how people may modify their bodies in the pursuit of bodily ‘perfectionism’.

**Andrew’s** empirical and theoretical research interests are grounded in methodological diversity and inspired by a continuing fascination with the ways that people experience different forms of embodiment over time in a variety of contexts. Recent work has focused on interrupted body projects (e.g., spinal cord injury) and the narrative reconstruction of self; ageing bodies in sport and physical activity contexts; sporting auto/biographies and body-self-culture relationships; and sensual ways of knowing and being in sport, physical activity and leisure. These interests are framed by a desire to develop interpretative forms of understanding via the use of life history, ethnography, autoethnography, phenomenology, and narrative approaches.