

Normalcy 2014 Conference

Theorising Normalcy and the Mundane: More Questions of the Human

Title: (Dis)abled athletes as the “Ambassadors of transhumanism”

James Brighton (Canterbury Christ Church University)

Andrew C. Sparkes (Research Institute for Sport, Physical Activity and Leisure, Leeds Metropolitan University)

Drawing on data generated from a four year ethnographic study into wheelchair sport in England we examine how (dis)abled athletes come to understand themselves as a “complex hybridisation” between (Wo)Man and machine (Haraway, 1991). A structural narrative analysis of the ‘big’ and ‘small’ stories (Bamberg, 2006) told by the (dis)abled athletes in the field revealed three ideal types in action. *Techno-survival stories* and *techno-rehabilitation stories* were entrenched in, and sanctioned by the medical discourses of restoration and normalisation that informed the way participants made sense of their bodies and constructed their identities over time. In contrast, using *cyborg embodiment stories* some participants demonstrated a sense of agency in creating new ways of relating to technology which allowed them to challenge and reject various dualisms (e.g., able/disabled, normal/abnormal), and instead construct ‘proud’ (dis)abled identities that imagine different kinds of humanity in relation to various technological fields. Some reflections are offered on the ways in which these cyborg embodiment stories transgress established dualisms and offer what Haraway (1991) calls “dangerous possibilities” for the empowerment of (dis)abled athletes. In this process we suggest that in the future (dis)abled athletes have the potential to become “ambassadors of transhumanism” as described by Miah (2003).

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.