**BPS DHP Conference 2017: Long Term Conditions:**

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**Being Looked At and Exposing Yourself: Appearance Altering Conditions and Stigma**

Objectives: To explore participants’ accounts of the impact of disfiguring conditions (“visible differences”) upon their romantic and intimate lives.

Design: Semi-structured qualitative interviews were performed to facilitate an exploratory investigation of this under-researched area, to focus upon participants’ individual experiences and afford priority to their accounts.

Methods: Twenty-two participants with a variety of visible differences and underlying aetiologies (including alopecia, cancer, skin and craniofacial conditions) were recruited through relevant charities and support groups. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed using inductive thematic analysis.

Results: Themes included ‘Being Public Property’ and ‘The Disclosure Dilemma.’ Both related to the visibility and revelation of stigmatised physical features. ‘Being Public Property’ was characterised by an awareness of other people’s intrusive stares and uninvited and assumptive comments, negating participants’ right to privacy. ‘The Disclosure Dilemma’ relayed feelings of uncertainty and anxiety about how and when participants should inform a new partner of their visible difference, whether they are obligated to do so and how that other person would respond.

Conclusions: These themes illustrated feelings of distress and anxiety and instances of both felt and enacted stigma experienced by participants with visible differences. Participants reported experiencing both forms of stigma in connection with visible differences that were ordinarily visible to and known by others and in connection with visible differences that were ordinarily concealed from and therefore invisible to and unknown by others. In the latter case ‘The Disclosure Dilemma’ arose and experiences of stigma intensified when participants considered the voluntary revelation of their difference to a new or potential partner.