Sarah Nettleton  
University of York, UK  

Session: **Embodying Sociology**

Enigmatic illness and elusive explanations: towards a sociology of medically unexplained symptoms.

During the 1980s the body became a fashionable topic within both sociology and the sub discipline of medical sociology. Although the merits and demerits of various perspectives on the body have been vigorously debated there is a general consensus that the analysis of health, illness and medicine has benefited from bringing the body into a shaper focus. But how has work in this sub field of sociology altered as a result of this emergent 'sociology of the body', or - depending on one's stance – an 'embodied' sociology? It is suggested that the analyses of substantive topics such health inequalities, innovative technologies, birth and death have benefited from such analytic developments. However the body remains enigmatic and arguably is increasingly elusive. Furthermore it is argued here that bio-medical knowledge of the body takes precedence in our understanding of bodies. But medical knowledge, like other forms of knowledge and expertise is becoming fractured as a result of technological and social transformations. This contributes to our uncertainty about what the body is and how we should make sense of it. The paper will draw on an empirical study of people who live with undiagnosed illness or 'medically unexplained symptoms' in order to illuminate this argument further.