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Editorial for the special issue:

Thoughtful gatherings: gendering conferences as spaces of learning, knowledge production and community

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Many accounts of conferences research begin with a lamentation that conferences are a neglected phenomenon. The lamentation goes that conferences are under-researched, despite their ubiquity, frequency and indeed net worth as a sub-group of the conferences and events industry (Henderson, 2015; Mair, 2014; Nicolson, 2017; Rowe, 2018). However, arguably we no longer need to mourn the absence of conferences from academic debates, as they have risen to greater prominence. In recent years conferences have featured in academic debates as controversial phenomena which are worthy of news and comment. Perhaps Twitter is responsible for this, with its capacity to bring together large online communities of academics, but blog posts and newspaper articles on conferences have also proliferated. One of the first viral conference controversies concerned the calling out of ‘manels’ or events with all-men panels, as reported on the Tumblr ‘Congrats you have an all male panel!’ (<https://allmalepanels.tumblr.com/>). Conferences have also come to the fore in relation to: ‘wanels’ or all-white panels (<https://twitter.com/hashtag/wanels>), visa restrictions preventing conference delegates accessing conferences (Fazackerley, 2017), the unaffordability of conferences (@JennyAThatcher, 2019; Hong, 2018), how conferences will be affected by Brexit (Swain, 2019), and conferences as sites of sexual harassment (@Phil_Baty, 2019; Pells, 2019). In 2019 a Tweet from @JasonChow, an academic who accidentally flew to the wrong city in Canada and missed a conference (@Jason Chow, 2019) elicited an unexpected rush of online academic activity (3.7k likes) as academics cathartically shared their conference blunders and revealed their secret paranoias about attending conferences. A recent thread inviting academics to share a gif symbolically representing themselves at conferences also led to astonishing online activity (@Anne_Kreft, 2019: 1.6k replies and 986 likes).

Within this proliferation of academic conversations on conferences, gender and feminist scholars take an active role, in part because of the longstanding tradition of feminist critiques of academic norms, but also because many of the ‘viral’ conference controversies have been gender-related issues. A recent explosion of Tweets about sexual harassment, bullying and intimidation at conferences emerged in response to a naive Tweet by journalist Phil Baty asking for examples of bad conference behaviour (Pells, 2019). The result was an exposé of the prevalence of maltreatment particularly of women at conferences. Because conferences are temporary, transient sites of embodied knowledge production (Henderson, 2020), intersecting gendered academic identities are performed, maintained and also disrupted at conferences. Some inequitable practices and behaviours which occur within the walls of higher education institutions are exacerbated in conference settings because of the nature of conferences as quasi-touristic, extra-institutional spaces. Gender issues at conferences include sexual harassment, binary-gendered bathrooms, exclusionary practices around breastfeeding and other care-related issues: all of these practices occur at conferences in ways that are peculiar to conference settings. Because of their extra-institutional status, there is often no clear institutional complaints procedure for unethical or exclusionary behaviour that occurs at academic gatherings. Conferences have also been identified as exclusionary in many ways, including for the academic precariat who struggle to access funds to attend conferences at precisely the career stage when conference networking and research exposure would be most useful. This too is a gender issue, as the precariat has been shown to be a gendered phenomenon with disproportionate numbers of women occupying its ranks (see e.g. Courtois & O’Keefe, 2015). All of these issues and more are ripe for deeper analysis; the increased coverage of conference controversies created the momentum needed to crystallise the ideas for this special issue.

We can no longer lament that there is no attention paid to conferences, and neither can we complain that there is no research on conferences. Our respective forays into conferences research have revealed a substantial body of literature which focuses entirely or in part on the conferences phenomenonⁱ. The literature is dispersed across disciplines and is disparate in terms of method, orientation and approach, varying from business literature on enhancing the profitability of conferences (Comas & Moscardo, 2005; Hahm, Breiter, Severt, Wang, & Fjelstul, 2016), to sociological and geographical analyses of the geopolitical distribution of conferences (Derudder & Liu, 2016; Dubrow, Kołczyńska, Slomczynski, & Tomescu-Dubrow, 2015), to an educational focus on learning at conferences (Fakunle, Dollinger, Alla-Mensah & Izard, 2019; Walkington, Hill, & Kneale, 2017). Furthermore literature on conferences often takes the form of reflective pieces (Bruce, 2010; Tsalach, 2012), particularly in short-form ‘think piece’ journal articles (Hickson III, 2006; Skelton, 1997), which do not carry the same weight as full-length articles, and much of the commentary on conferences is located in blog posts and grey literature. The same can be said of gender and feminist literature on conferences, which is similarly scattered and disconnected.

The most common gender analysis of conferences focuses on inequalities of representation at conferences, where numbers of men and women are counted in different roles and scenarios. Commonly, this work investigates gendered distribution of delegates across longer and shorter presentation slots (Jones, Fanson, Lanfear, Symonds, & Higgie, 2014), presence of women in key roles such as keynote and conference committee chair (Eden, 2016; Walters, 2018), and gendered patterns of participation in Q&A sessions (Hinsley, Sutherland, & Johnston, 2017). In general, such analyses often exclude trans and gender non-binary delegates from consideration due to these studies’ reliance on visual or name-based methods of classification (which assume gender and/or ethnicity identifications of delegates by sight or by names listed in a conference programme, often without confirming with the individual involved). Despite methodological limitations regarding the classification of gender, this work presents a valuable analysis of some of the inequalities that conferences produce and reproduce. Further work is more thematic in nature, for example focusing on sexual harassment of women at conferences (Jackson, 2019), or on the challenges of being an academic parent (generally a mother) at conferences (Hook, 2016; Lipton, 2019). Intersectional analyses of gender and conferences have identified academics’ struggle to gain a sense of belonging at conferences on the basis of gender along with race (King et al., 2018) and class (Stanley, 1995). A separate strand of research identifies specific conferences as landmark moments in the development of academic feminism and the field of women’s and gender studies (Basch, 2001; ruby, elliot, & douglas, 1990). Finally, there have been some considerations of feminist pedagogy in relation to conferences (L. Bell, 1987; Saul, 1992).

While there has been relatively little work on gender and feminism in comparison with other studies of conferences, at the same time a wider exploration shows that feminist scholarship is packed full of conferences, albeit referenced as sidenotes, anecdotes or examples. Tuning into the conference radio station (Henderson, 2020) reveals the salience of (feminist) conferences for gender and feminist work as sites of racism and resistance to racism (Ahmed, 2012), of the formation of feminist friendships (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016), of the formation of new fields of study (Stryker, 2006), of the inspiration for new publications (Allan, Iverson, & Ropers-Huilman, 2010).

This special issue emerged from a number of concerns: firstly, that conferences were receiving heightened attention on social media - often as a negative and exclusionary phenomenon; secondly, that gender and feminist concerns were neglected in the broader literature on conferences; thirdly that gender and feminist scholarship often used conferences as a backdrop for, or instance of, another phenomenon, yet seemed reticent to focus directly on conferences. As part of a wider project to develop an area of study named ‘Critical Conference Studies’ (a sibling to Critical Event Studies, see e.g. Finkel, Sharp, & Sweeney, 2019), we aspired to curate a special issue which would bring together a variety of approaches to analysing conferences from a gender/feminist perspective, and thus for the first time collect together in one place gender and feminist scholarship specifically focusing on conferences. The special issue is entitled ‘Thoughtful Gatherings’ because we wanted to turn the critical and reflexive feminist lens directly onto the conferences phenomenon, and to inspire more

thoughtful approaches to organising and attending conferences, to considering how institutions facilitate access to academic gatherings, and to provoke more critical research on conferences. We were overwhelmed by the response to our call for papers, with no fewer than 39 proposals for articles. In the event, we could only accommodate eight articles and two viewpoint pieces, but we have endeavoured to ensure a balance of different locations, feminisms, topics, theoretical tools and research approaches across the special issue. While the eight articles report on empirical projects or research initiatives, we welcomed two viewpoint articles to the special issue, which have the specific function of developing debates about topical issues that surround gender and conferencing. In the following sections of this editorial, we engage with the concerns of the articles contained within the special issue, and speak across them in relation to the three key themes of ‘Thoughtful Gatherings’: (i) learning, (ii) knowledge and (iii) community. We end with reflections on where the special issue has taken us, and where this nascent field might venture next.

Learning

The way that learning is formally structured at conferences often uses a formal, lecture-style pedagogy, even at conferences that are otherwise radical and aim to challenge the status quo (see e.g. Burford, Henderson, & Pausé, 2018). Although feminist academics have been pioneers of critical and feminist pedagogy within institutional environments, there has been less consideration of feminist conference pedagogy. At the level of conference organisation, there is often an unreflexive replication of conferences past, though some scholars have experimented with alternative conference pedagogies (see e.g. Benozzo, Carey, Cozza, Elmenhorst, Fairchild, Koro-Ljungberg & Taylor, 2019). The learning experience of conferences is ripe for feminist analysis, and one of the aims of the special issue has been to develop the range of perspectives on conference learning and pedagogy. Many questions remain about how delegates learn at conferences, the kinds of environments that support conference learning, and the pedagogical intentions of conference organisers and presenters.

While all the papers in the special issue touch on conference learning and pedagogy in some fashion, some are particularly focused on this topic. Belliappa’s (2020) reflections on the challenges and disappointments of attending large conferences are contrasted with an analysis of a small two-day conference which integrated Theatre of the Oppressed in the conference pedagogy as well as being the conference theme. The conference aimed to create community and equalise hierarchies, and the impact of this experience then rippled out to Belliappa’s classroom practice, showing the potential for feminist conference pedagogy to inform and be informed by teaching and learning within educational institutions. This topic is picked up and addressed from a different angle in Burford, Bosanquet and Smith’s (2020) piece on organising small, thoughtful gatherings where the work of curating inclusive learning spaces is revealed and explored as a form of labour. In their collective discussion of online gatherings as alternatives to in-person conference attendance, Black, Crimmins, Dwyer and Lister (2020) illustrate the potential for online conferring to replicate and indeed move beyond conference networking.

Several contributions to the special issue explore ways in which conferences can be experienced as exclusionary, both in terms of access to conference *attendance*, and access to a meaningful conference *experience*. These papers highlight the fact that the exclusionary nature of conferences means that learning opportunities at conferences are inaccessible and/or disrupted for many groups, including women and indigenous scholars (Timperley, Sutherland, Wilson & Hall, 2020), women and scholars from marginalised caste groups (Sabharwal, Henderson & Joseph, 2020), women and others who are targets of sexual harassment (Flores, 2020), trans* scholars (Nicolazzo & Jourian, 2020), academics with caring responsibilities (Henderson & Moreau, 2020), accompanying (often women) partners of delegates (Yoo & Wilson, 2020), and marginalised groups who embody the focus of the conference (e.g. sex workers in Barron, 2020). Importantly, Black et al. (2020), while recognising obstacles to accessing conference learning, also propose an alternative means of conferring using messaging, videoconference and social media programmes; they reflect on their online conferring as both combatting physical isolation and producing an enhanced embodied connectedness.

Knowledge

Conferences function as embodied sites of knowledge production in their own right, but they are also enmeshed in longer threads of academic work, disseminating and bringing together previous research and also leading to further knowledge production (Kyvik & Larsen, 1994; Smeby & Trondal, 2005). The knowledge production function of conferences has a heightened importance for feminist and gender scholarship, in that fields that are marginalised within institutions are particularly reliant on extra-institutional spaces such as conferences to achieve legitimacy and develop into knowledge communities (Krishna, 2007). Accounts of the development of the Women's and Gender Studies field are rife with references to conferences, particularly in relation to the significance of conferences as field-founding gestures. Conferences in Mumbai (then Bombay) in 1981 (John, 2008; Pappu, 2002) and Toulouse in 1982 (Kandel, 2001) are frequently set down as key moments for the disciplinary development of women's studies in India and France, for example, and the 1997 conference at the Pompidou Centre in Paris serves as a marker for the consolidation of the field of queer studies in France (Davis & Kollias, 2012).

However conferences are also locations where feminist and gender knowledge is delegitimised (Pereira, 2017), and indeed feminist and gender conferences themselves may also serve to delegitimise certain areas of knowledge production - and certain knowledge producers. Nicolazzo and Jourian's (2020) contribution to the special issue foregrounds the notion of disruption in academic spaces by knowledge producers who are frequently delegitimised at conferences. Their article focuses on a conference session they and other trans* scholars organised at a mainstream higher education disciplinary conference in the USA. The session aimed to foreground trans* knowledge production by creating a disruptive space in the conference curriculum (see also Pryor, Garvey, & Johnson, 2017), but the authors also questioned the extent to which a disruptive session can qualify as a disruption if the knowledge production contained within does not seep into the ideas and practices of the conference as a whole. Barron's (2020) piece centres on the exclusion of sex workers and sex workers' perspectives from a feminist conference on this topic in Australia, and in this case the boundary of the conference (both physical and online) became the site of disruptive knowledge production and protest.

As is the case with conference learning, exclusion from conferences also results in exclusion from knowledge production as well as from further indirect benefits that may ensue. As noted above in the learning section, several of the contributions to the special issue focus on conference exclusions, both relating to what we may term 'missing delegates' who struggle to gain access to conferences as well as 'missing while present delegates' who attend but are excluded from participating fully in the conference. Part of this issue relates to who is recognised as a knowledge producer within academia. Sabharwal et al.'s (2020) article shows how the lack of recognition of women academics and academics from marginalised caste groups as bona fide knowledge producers results in institutional barriers to gaining funding and permission to attend conferences; Sutherland et al. (2020) extend these findings to indigenous scholars in Aotearoa New Zealand in their investigation of early career academics' conference participation. The 'missing delegates' phenomenon also leads to missing knowledge at conferences, as research on marginalised groups conducted by marginalised groups is, as a result of their absence from conferences, missing from the conference curriculum. 'Missing while present delegates' include conference organisers who engage in gendered care work at conferences at the expense of participating in knowledge production (Burford et al., 2020), academics who manage caring responsibilities from a distance while at conferences (Moreau & Henderson, 2020) and partners of conference delegates who are seldom recognised as knowledge producers in their own right (Yoo & Wilson, 2020).

Community

Historically, conferences have been important spaces for building feminist solidarity, friendship and careers. Yet where there is community, there are also issues of belonging, membership and exclusion (Simmons & Jourian, 2019). Thus the theme of 'community' in this special issue addresses both the importance of conferences for academic community building, and the negative underside of conference communities. A conference which feels successful and groundbreaking for the organisers may be interpreted as exclusionary and parochial by delegates, as shown in the contrast between the

introduction to an edited collection based on a European conference on intersectionality (Lutz, Herrera Vivar, & Supik, 2011), and the suite of journal articles that ensued, critiquing the racial politics of this conference (Bilge, 2013; Lewis, 2013; Petzen, 2012). With gender-related knowledge production, conference communities can be doubly exclusionary due to the mirroring of research topics in researchers' identities, so that the marginalisation of an academic field also reduces the possibility of its researchers establishing a sense of belonging in the academy. Conferences reinforce academic hierarchies, reproducing and enhancing the power of the powerful through the performative practices of scheduling, gatekeeping and stratified socialising (Bell & King, 2010; Walters, 2019). However, they can also break down hierarchies and produce unexpected bonds (Cosenza, 2012; L.R., 2012). Conferences are a volatile, unpredictable phenomenon, which makes them a fascinating but also challenging site for academic community building.

The papers in the special issue cumulatively highlight the importance of conferences as vehicles for accessing academic communities as well as conferences as communities in their own right. Gaining access to conferences is both more challenging and more vital for marginalised groups, as shown in the papers by Sutherland et al. (2020) and Sabharwal et al. (2020). More challenging because access depends on the gatekeepers of the academic community within institutions and conference committees; more vital because conference communities can provide recognition and support - as well as key credentials for promotion - which may be less forthcoming within institutions. As shown by Nicolazzo and Jourian (2020), minoritised communities can find solidarity and collectivity at conferences, or community may even arise in opposition to inequitable practices at the conference itself (e.g. Barron, 2020; Flores, 2020). However, participation in conference communities relies on a delegate's capacity to be fully present - to be able to attend the conference in the first place, and to be able to participate in all sections and days of the conference. The challenge of being fully present is illustrated in this special issue through Henderson and Moreau's (2020) study of balancing care and conferences, Yoo and Wilson's (2020) exploration of accompanying partners' semi-participation and Burford et al.'s (2020) contribution on managing conference organisation as a form of care. Two papers in the special issue set out different ways of enacting conference community; Belliappa (2020) examines how different conference pedagogies might enable different kinds of communities to flourish, within and beyond the conference; Black et al. (2020) document how modes of 'conferring' might be re-imagined, offering online routes to facilitate and sustain new communities.

Thoughtful gatherings and beyond

This special issue has gathered together the thoughts of a varied set of authors to reflect on two interrelated questions. Firstly, what might a feminist and gendered analysis contribute to our understanding of academic conferences? And secondly, by taking conferences as a central object of inquiry, what new things might gender and feminist researchers be able to discover about their own practices of learning, knowledge production and community?

With regard to feminist and gender analyses of conferences, this special issue has connected accounts of the exclusions experienced by women (e.g. with regard to access to and within conferences, and harassment) to accounts of intersecting gendered academic identities, as well as the experiences of trans* scholars at academic gatherings. This linking and joining of such accounts encourages researchers to take up more nuanced, complex positions when conceptualising gender in conferences research, institutional policy-making, and conference management. However, clearly there remains further work to be done to conceptualise gender in more inclusive and complex ways that are attentive to gender diversity and non-conformity. Future research might also usefully investigate the enactment of masculinities at conferences, as well as the ways in which the gendering of conferences plays out in diverse geographical contexts - and across borders - that have been under-considered to date. Future feminist and gender research on conferences might take on a multi-faceted mission. There is a need to be able to quantify the degree of exclusion and discrimination experienced by variously positioned academics, and to quantify the costs of such exclusions. At the same time there is also a need to tease out the micro-practices which play out within institutions and conference spaces. This is a pressing need, because micro-practices occur along the lines of intersectional inequalities and systemic marginalisation. As such, critically engaged conferences research going forward needs to be able to

hold in tension the possibility that conferences are experienced as both sites of exclusion *as well as* crucial gathering grounds. Further contributions might centre the question of what close analysis of conferences allows researchers to discover about the practices of feminist and gender studies knowledge production.

Turning to conferences practice and research, papers in the special issue have offered innovative ideas on re-imagining the modes by which academics might gather, in ways more closely aligned with feminist and gender-inclusive philosophies. We propose that these papers offer resources for future conference organisers and delegates to experiment with, so as to enhance collective capacities to learn, make knowledge and build communities at conferences. Future conferences researchers will continue to confront concerns raised in this special issue, such as how to produce spaces that are inclusive of trans* delegates, delegates with caring responsibilities and that are capable of addressing the harm of gender-based violence and harassment. With regard to conferences research, this special issue demonstrates the value of quantitative and qualitative research approaches as well as reflective and autoethnographic scholarship. As conferences research moves forward, further tools - such as comparative, longitudinal, archival and policy research could be usefully explored. Furthermore, in order to more fully account for conferences, conferences researchers need to gather together the existing work that exists on conferences across disparate fields so as to build a more solid foundation for future research. In relation to the future of gender and conferences research, we hope to see more conferences research which uses feminist methodological approaches and feminist theories, as well as a strengthening of our gender knowledge relating to conference participation and practices, particularly in relation to intersectional understandings of gender and conceptualisations of gender that move beyond the binary.

In this special issue we have sought to foreground an array of international scholarship. To do so is especially pertinent given the role of conferences in uniting—and perpetuating the exclusion of—international scholarly communities. The authors included in this volume surely extend the thinking in this field in new and exhilarating ways. By gathering them together we aim to present a complex conceptualisation of gender/feminism and conferences. Whereas standalone work can reify gender and reify conferences, the friction that occurs when these ideas bump up against each other is productive; it serves to counter simplified understandings of a complex phenomenon.

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Note

ⁱ For an online resource listing publications, see <https://conferenceinference.wordpress.com/conference-resources/>