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Academics in Two Places at Once: (Not) Managing Caring Responsibilities at Conferences

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Abstract:

Conferences are important but neglected research sites. Yet conferences are sites where knowledge is constructed and shared, where careers are made and unmade, where important connections are formed, and they play a vital role in the development of research fields. There are many factors which determine who accesses which conferences where; this chapter focuses on the impact of caring responsibilities on academics' access to and participation in conferences. Importantly, 'access' in this chapter is conceived of as both the ability to attend conferences, and the ability to participate in conferences once there. The chapter locates the specific discussion of conference attendance in the literature on academics and caring responsibilities. The chapter then considers the methodological and theoretical challenges involved in researching how caring responsibilities impact on academics' experiences of being at conferences; this section addresses the design and implementation of a time-log research tool which was used in the research project 'In Two Places at Once: The Impact of Caring Responsibilities on Academics' Conference Attendance'. The third part of the chapter presents findings specifically from the time-log aspect of the research project, in which academics recorded the frequency, type and experience of contact with caring responsibilities during conferences.

Introduction

Check that [my son] is OK between the keynote and first parallel session (P4)

During a technical hitch I check my phone. I don't like having my phone on silent as I worry I may miss a call from school/nursery (P12)

Conferences are important but neglected research sites in the research field that focuses on documenting and analysing academia and the academic profession (Henderson, 2015). As sites where knowledge is constructed and shared, where careers are made and unmade, where important connections are formed, conferences play a vital role in the development of research fields (Basch, 2001; McCulloch, 2012). The issue of access to conferences is therefore much more than an issue of accessing an event for a few days; it is an issue of access to any number of potential future avenues. There are many factors which determine who accesses which conferences where, including funding, institutional support, and border politics (Henderson, 2017); this chapter focuses on the impact of caring responsibilities on academics' participation in conferences. The chapter is based on a research project entitled 'In Two Places at Once: the Impact of Caring Responsibilities on Academics' Conference Participation'¹ (www.warwick.ac.uk/i2po). In this project, access to conferences is framed in two senses, which reflect debates about access to education, where access is understood as access *to* and access *within* (Aikman and Unterhalter, 2005). Access *to* conferences refers to an academic's ability to attend conferences, while access *within* calls attention to the possibility of the academic fully participating in the conference while there. As with the equivalent debates on access *to* and *within* education, access *to* conferences has hitherto received more attention than access *within*. This chapter therefore focuses on the issue of access *within* conferences for academics with caring responsibilities.

As can be seen from the quotations at the start of this section, participants in the study were involved in managing a state of being 'in two places at once', between conferences and caring responsibilities.

The excerpts are from a time-log data collection tool which I developed for this study, in order to capture some of the minutiae of the ‘in two places at once’ state. The chapter asks the following questions: (i) what was involved in being ‘in two places at once’ – which aspects of the conference and care were participants balancing?; (ii) how did the participants enact ‘in two places at once’, and which mechanisms did they use to achieve this?; (iii) how can we understand ‘in two places at once’ as a temporal mode of being? The third question builds on the theorisation of academic subjectivity and temporality in relation to conferences that I have previously developed (Henderson, 2018). The definition of ‘care’ in this study encapsulated partners, children and other family members, pets, friends and kin; the findings discussed in the chapter therefore address a range of care constellations. The chapter as a whole argues that issues of access and conferences should be framed in relation to access *within* as well as access *to*, and that paying attention to the harder-to-measure aspects of access provides important insights for both conferences and wider academic practice.

‘In Two Places at Once’: academics, care and conferences

The questions that are addressed in this chapter bring together somewhat discrete areas of literature from different disciplinary contexts: care and academia; academic mobility; work-based travel. Indeed we can say that there is no real sense of a body of literature on academic conferences, because of the sporadic and dispersed ways in which they are written about – at times as a site for researching social and academic processes, including academic identity formation (Bruce, 2010; Henderson, 2015), learning and pedagogy (Burford, Henderson and Pausé, 2017; Walkington, Hill and Kneale, 2017) and knowledge construction (Gross and Fleming, 2011; Henderson, 2016); as a focus for professional development (Becker, 2014; Rowe, 2017); as a form of tourism (Tretyakevich and Maggi, 2012; Yoo, McIntosh and Cockburn-Wooten, 2016) and a corporate business (Lee, Park and Khan, 2012). In social sciences and humanities literature on conferences, conferences tend to be researched as a side or background topic in an author’s oeuvre, for example in relation to class (Stanley, 1995), gender (Pereira, 2017), dis/ability (Hodge, 2014), and sexual harassment (Jackson, 2017). The implication for conferences research is that there is a lack of consistent interrogation of the inequalities that academic conferences produce and reproduce. The ‘In Two Places at Once’ project is envisaged as a contribution to this lacuna, by offering a sociologically informed analysis of issues surrounding care and conferences.

Although literature on care and academia tends to predominantly focus on the higher education institution as the workplace, there is growing recognition that expectations of academic mobility demand special attention (Moreau and Robertson, 2017). Furthermore, researchers are starting to recognise that, although the direct and indirect career benefits of mobility are difficult to quantify, there is increasingly a mobility imperative in the academic job market (Herschberg, Benschop and van den Brink, 2016). As Leemann (2010) has indicated, academic mobility has often been constructed as the movement of a lone mobile subject, meaning that mobility expectations and provision operate to the exclusion of caregivers, who are often women (Jöns, 2011). In the literature on academia and care, and on gender and academic mobility, there is a clear focus on parenting and children, with care and caring responsibilities associated within a normatively defined nuclear family. In the ‘In Two Places at Once’ study, in line with Moreau and Robertson’s (2017) conceptualisation of care in their study of academics with caring responsibilities, care was understood as often ‘combining multiple caring responsibilities’ and as ‘fluid and...complex’ (p. 3). This wider conceptualisation problematises the conception that offering childcare services at conferences is *the* solution, and instead takes into consideration caring responsibilities that are more hidden from the eyes of the institution, such as elderly parents and ill partners (ibid.).

Attending conferences is a form of academic mobility, albeit a short-term form. Due to the scarcity of literature on short-term academic mobility (measured in days), it is necessary to look towards literature on work-based travel more generally to understand the consequences of conference travel for academics with caring responsibilities. The aforementioned patterns of family commitments as a determinant of academic mobility (especially for women) are also reflected in research on work-based travel in the form of weekly travel and overnight trips (Dubois *et al*, 2015; Viry, Vincent-Geslin and Kaufmann, 2015). It is clear from Vincent-Geslin and Ravalet's (2015) participants' accounts, as well as from Ralph's (2015) study of Euro-commuters and Willis *et al.*'s (2017) study of business travel, that regular business travellers develop well-honed strategies for managing caring arrangements while away – even if these arrangements are a constant struggle and negotiation. While conferences mirror business travel, as noted by Parker and Weik (2014), there are some important differences. With the exception of elite academics who are 'at home in motion' (Fahey and Kenway, 2010, p. 568), conference travel occurs much less frequently than business travel of the kind researched in the aforementioned studies. In the 'In Two Places at Once' study, participants often did not have strategies in place for conference attendance, and previously used strategies were often obsolete by the next conference attended. Secondly, in the work-based travel literature, there is a sense of unquestioned obligation relating to travel. Conferences, however, hold a special status in that academics choose to attend them for their own professional development. This means that they are not understood as integral to the job as such, but are nonetheless clearly associated with career progression (Hickson III, 2006; Rittichainuwat, Beck and Lalopa, 2001). Conference travel, then, is both akin to and distinct from (i) routine patterns of work within a higher education institution, in that it involves a break with routine, (ii) longer term academic mobility, in that it does not involve relocation in the same sense, and (iii) work-related travel, in that it is less frequent or regular and has more of an 'optional' or 'chosen' status. These differences make conferences a distinctive site for the study of academics with caring responsibilities.

Researching conferences and caring responsibilities: methodological and theoretical challenges

The research design for the 'In Two Places at Once' project drew on studies by Hook (2016) and Moreau and Robertson (2017), which employed in-depth qualitative interviews to focus on the varied care scenarios of doctoral students (Hook) and academics (Moreau and Robertson). In line with these studies, 'In Two Places at Once' is also a small-scale, qualitative, exploratory study, which incorporates a focus on temporality. The specific focus on conferences required a research design that captured the break from routine, rather than the routine. This was particularly important for the issue of access *within* conferences, so as to capture the intricacies of specific conference experiences. In order to do this, participants were asked to focus on one particular conference as a form of case study for the purposes of this research. The conference experience was captured using a time-log data collection tool, that drew on time-use studies such as Wigley's (2017) study of mobile prayer practices. Participants were asked to record on a simple form their interactions with caring responsibilities or co-carers during the case study conference, as well as conversations with others about their caring responsibilities, and thoughts that came into their minds in relation to their caring responsibilities. They were asked to record the time and nature of the interaction/thought, and extra information as appropriate, for example relating to feelings and parts of the conference missed. For example, two entries on P14's² time-log state:

10:10	Text	I text her Dad to remind him she has a disco with her rainbows group on the weekend.
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12:08 Thought My mind wanders from the presentation + I think about my daughter and all the things I have to sort out for her new bedroom as we are moving house in 5 weeks.

Participants' use of the time-log varied from a few entries to several pages, and as such is not interpreted as an objectively comparable quantitative record of time use at conferences. Rather, the data is interpreted as participants' subjective portrayals of the state of being 'in two places at once'. The time-log data was then used as the basis for in-depth interviews both on the case study conference and participants' experiences of conferences more generally; in this chapter the time-log data is considered as a data set in its own right.

Participants for the study were recruited on a first come, first served basis, following the issuing of the call for participants on several academic mailing lists and on social media. Due to the flexible, exploratory nature of the study, participants could be based in any country, and were self-defined as 'academics' and as having 'caring responsibilities'. For 20 participants, the UK was the country of residence, but the sample also included Australia (5), US (2), Austria (1), Canada (1). Conference destinations were UK (13) Australia (3), US (3), Canada (2), and one each in Denmark, France, Germany, Japan, Kuwait, Portugal, South Africa and Sweden; 18 participants attended conferences within their country of residence, and 11 crossed international border/s. Conferences varied from one day to six days; 3 days was the mode (12 participants). Participants included one full-time carer (resuming work as a lecturer later in 2017), doctoral students (6) and doctoral students with parallel roles (5), research associates (4), as well as lecturers/assistant professors (4), senior lecturers/associate professors (3), readers and full professors (6). Primary caring responsibilities stated on the form primarily included children (25 participants), animals (9 participants), partners (6 participants), parents (5 participants), but also included a sibling, a friend, and a children's club. However it is necessary to note that many participants added extra caring responsibilities into the time-log and the interview, and that the primary responsibilities declared on the form are a reflection of participants' interpretations of the term 'caring responsibility'. Furthermore, several participants listed as primary caring responsibilities a combination of two (8 participants) or three (5 participants) of the above categories.

The analysis of the time-log data that is drawn on in the following section is based on the theorisation of conference time that is outlined in 'Feminist conference time: aiming (not) to have been there' (Henderson, 2018). This theorisation is located within analyses of time in contemporary academia, where time is commonly understood as 'fast moving and constantly changing' (Harris, 2005, p. 421) and 'compressed' (Mountz *et al*, 2015, p. 1236). However, in line with Lapping's (2016) analysis, the theorisation recognises that it is not that time is objectively speeding up, but rather that people's relationship to time is altering (see also Sullivan and Gershuny, 2017). Key to this conceptual reversal is the understanding of time as external to subjects, who then react to time in a passive or active manner. In a passive relationship with time, time is understood as 'clock time' (Adam, 2006; Adkins, 2009). This means that 'the continuous duration of time [is perceived] as a given' (Lapping, 2016, p. 3). At conferences, this relationship with time is clearly evident in the strictly timetabled conference schedule, where delegates move obediently between allotted spaces at allotted times. For delegates with caring responsibilities, the clock time of a conference can be understood as constructing a parallel timetable for managing caring responsibilities, including when phone calls can be made, or which arrangements need to be in place to allow punctual arrival at the conference. A more active or agentic relationship with time sees subjects develop strategies to manage time, or lack thereof, known as 'self-governing technologies' (Nikunen, 2014, p. 120), which give the impression of the 'subjugation of time to human will' (Clegg, 2010, p. 347). In relation to managing caring responsibilities while at a conference, this understanding of time was

enacted in the adaptation and stretching of the conference ‘clock time’, where the timetable was adapted to allow for the parallel role of care-giver.

It is important to note that the passive and active relationships with time are not discrete – rather, they are held in constant tension. There is a (subjectively determined) limit to how much the conference ‘clock time’ can be adapted to fit with managing caring responsibilities – how many sessions and networking opportunities missed, how much attention diverted during sessions; for if this limit is surpassed, ‘clock time’ – and its inflexibility – wins. The following section explores the interaction between conference and care schedules to further develop the understanding of being ‘in two places at once’.

Exploring the state of being ‘in two places at once’

The analysis of being ‘in two places at once’ at conferences that is presented in this section is based on the 100+ time-log entries which explicitly mentioned both the conference schedule and participants’ caring responsibilities. The analysis in this section is structured according to the three questions asked in the introduction to the paper: (i) what was involved in being ‘in two places at once’ – which aspects of the case study conference and care were participants balancing?; (ii) how did the participants enact ‘in two places at once’, and which mechanisms did they use to achieve this?; (iii) how can we understand ‘in two places at once’ as a temporal mode of being?

Balancing conference and care

There were two principal types of care-related contact in general. Firstly, a ‘check-up’ to establish that all was well with participants’ caring responsibilities and to check that scheduled transitions in care (eg. school pick-up) had gone to plan. For example, P10 made a phone call to her mother, who was looking after her three children during part of the conference: ‘Phone call as I was walking to the conference venue to check in on everyone’; P35 exchanged five text messages in the mid-morning break ‘to check everything was ok at home’. Secondly, participants became involved in communicating about an unforeseen incident. P2 and P23 both experienced issues with their pre-planned childcare plans, as in both cases a child was sent home from school because of illness, and P18’s dog had to be urgently taken to the vet.

Participants tended to use the beginning and the end of the day for planned, longer ‘check-up’ interactions. Breaks and transitions were used for more perfunctory ‘check-ups’. For example, P49, who is a full-time carer for her mother, who has a life-limiting condition, notes ‘I phoned mum during the lunch break to check she was ok’. In another example of break-time activity, P23 makes a mental note about a care transition: ‘I wonder if my dad has managed to pick up my daughter and get her to piano class’. Her entry continues, ‘It is lunch time so does not interrupt the conference’. This statement constructs just the formal sessions as constituting the ‘conference’, which omits the importance of social times as the moments where collaborations are formed. The dual status of break-time as time for socialising and attending to care is reflected in an entry in P18’s time-log, where she received a care-transition confirmation text from her parents while ‘in the midst of a conversation with a new contact’ and noted that she ‘lost [her] train of thought/couldn’t remember what [she] had been saying to them’. Again there is a sense that the social parts of the conference are not as important as the formal sessions; depending on the reason for attending a conference, this time may in fact be the most valuable slot of the day. In general, the formal sessions were seen as the least interruptible, though, as shown in the next section, very few participants were prepared to completely lay aside the ‘care’ part of being ‘in two places at once’ during sessions.

Attempting and (not) achieving a state of being ‘in two places at once’

This section returns more explicitly to the theorisation of conferences and time, where conference delegates try to stretch and manipulate ‘clock time’ in order to achieve a state of being ‘in two places at once’. Here I refer to two examples of ‘winning’ and two of ‘losing’ in this struggle. Firstly, an unexpected break in the formal sessions of the conference is experienced as a ‘win’. For example, P1 was attending a conference that was partly in a language that she did not speak; she used this time as a bonus ‘opportunity to think about what [she] need[ed] to do’. This included setting up ‘a to-do list in [her] online calendar’, ‘buy[ing] [her husband] a birthday present’, as well as ‘reading some research articles’. A second ‘win’ came from actively and creatively sharing the conference with those back home through use of virtual communication. P6, for example, took pictures of ‘how grand/fancy the facilities and services are’ to send to her partner.

In terms of a ‘loss’ in the attempt to produce and maintain a state of ‘two places at once’, in some cases the conference was dominated by unforeseen incidents which produced a sense of helplessness, guilt and frustration for participants. These types of incidents seemed to highlight the fragility of the arrangements that participants put into place in order to be able to participate in this type of short-term, irregular mobility. P10’s partner was going through a gender transition and their mental health was fragile; they were also looking after the couple’s children and pets during part of the conference. P10 became concerned about her partner’s well-being when she phoned and could not get hold of them; this concern manifested itself in 11 missed calls to her partner’s phone, as well as text conversations with her mother and neighbour. P18, whose care arrangements fell through when her dog needed to be taken to the vet, wrote an entry at 9am on the last day of the conference: ‘I essentially felt like my conference was over, and I was completely distracted by thoughts of what I needed to do when I got home’.

The second type of ‘loss’ that I address here involved missing whole or parts of conference sessions because of care issues. For P23, a phone conversation with her partner about her daughter being sent home ill from school was longer than expected, and led to her ‘missing a panel’; she then sat for an extra half an hour ‘still thinking about [her] daughter being ill and what is for the best with her tomorrow in terms of childcare’. P9 was ‘30 minutes late’ and therefore missed the summary given by ‘[his] main collaborator’ at the conference because of a ‘nice easy’ Skype conversation with his partner and daughter which became ‘not easy when it came time to go to work’. This moment prompted an emotional self-questioning of ‘priorities’ around ‘what is the right thing to do’; P9 recorded ‘Still a bit teary as I write’. A commonality in all of the accounts is the prominence of mobile technology – both as a means of staying in touch and a reminder of distance (Willis *et al*, 2017) or even of the fallibility and fallacy of actually being ‘in two places at once’. The role of technology is explored further in the next section.

‘In two places at once’ as a temporal state of being

Thus far in this analysis section, ‘in two places at once’ has been principally represented through actions – calls and messages sent and received. These actions are set against a backdrop of what we might call ‘active inaction’, i.e. a constant state of hyperawareness of caring responsibilities at all times, which is particularly intense because of the distance and changes to usual caring arrangements. This was particularly clear when participants recorded that they were waiting for contact. For example, P5 waited for 1.5 hours for a reply to a ‘check-up’ message she sent at 9am. This waiting period coincided with the time before her presentation, where she was firstly distracted from preparing for her presentation by ‘feeling upset’ and ‘wondering why no message’, and then, when the message arrived ‘just before...going to present’, the relief meant that she was then ‘not 100% focused on [her] presentation’. Similarly, P15 realised at 3pm that the school pick-up that her

mother was doing would be complete before her presentation slot at 4:15pm, so she waited for a sign that this had gone smoothly. From 3pm until 3:27pm she ‘kept an eye on phone for reassuring text from [my mother]’. Eventually at 3:27pm she sent a ‘check-up’ text to her mother, and at 3:30pm she received a text from her mother to say ‘all was fine’. This ongoing state is also manifested in entries where participants recorded a specific thought that appeared to rise up into their minds in a session. For example, P7, whose mother had just been diagnosed with cancer, and whose partner was away on a research trip in another time zone during P7’s conference, realised that, by attending the keynote, she was ‘missing [her] chance to speak to [her] partner before she went to sleep’, and ‘found [her]self weighing up whether the keynote was worth it’. P13 ‘switched off’ during a ‘presentation [that was] out of [her] sphere of comprehension’ and found herself thinking, ‘I’d rather be with my dogs’. These time-log entries give an entry to the ongoing mental state of managing and thinking about caring responsibilities while at a conference. Here, the relationship between the conference participant and ‘clock time’ is shown as an internal, everpresent dialogue with self, an interweaving of parallel threads of thought, where a kink in attention paid to the conference leads to the surfacing of the thoughts about care.

Conclusion

Given the almost complete lack of research conducted into the impact of caring responsibilities on academics’ conference attendance, this article has sought to provide some foundations for this area of study. In particular, the article has focused on issues of access *within* conferences, arguing that it is not enough to record the enrolment figures at a conference: it is just as important to explore academics’ experiences of managing care while at conferences. It is also noteworthy that for many participants contact with home was pleasurable and comforting, and that the care was mutually bestowed on conference participants who had had a difficult day or who were lonely and homesick. As such, caring responsibilities cannot be conceived as simply having a negative impact on participants’ conference participation. From the analysis of the time-log data, it was clear however that conferences constituted a challenging environment for maintaining contact.

Combining the data analysis with the theorisation of time and subjectivity resulted in the elucidation of what it means to ‘win’ or ‘lose’ against the ‘clock time’ of a conference. ‘Winning’ involved finding extra time for care within the schedule, and creatively sharing the conference experience with those ‘back home’. ‘Losing’ involved the conference being dominated by care issues which required practical solutions from a distance and which provoked high levels of anxiety in participants; ‘losing’ was also manifested when parts of an important session were missed due to the difficulty of managing communication into transition and break times. A common factor of both ‘winning’ and ‘losing’ was the role of technology in both managing care and exacerbating anxiety. Moreover, the importance of technology is not only manifested in its use; the time-log data also revealed that, even when not directly using technology, participants were at times waiting in a state of ‘active inaction’ for a sign that all was well. As such, the state of ‘being in two places at once’ can be understood as much more than a set of actions – rather, it is a state of mind that is both impossible and yet nonetheless experienced by conference delegates.

Questions for discussion

- How do events exclude or include people with caring responsibilities?
- What makes an event ‘care friendly’?
- What does considering ‘access within’ add to discussions of ‘access to’ events?
- What are the different temporalities involved in events, and how can they be researched?

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² The participants are numbered according to the order in which they responded to the invitation to participate, though not all of these participated.