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Caring while Conferencing: Introducing the 'In Two Places at Once' Research Project

Unlike regular commuting, with its established patterns and routines, conferences are interruptions, perhaps disruptions, to academic lives. This means that, while strategies may be developed over time as to 'what happens to x when I attend a conference', the types of strategies that have been studied by mobile work researchers do not apply in the same way (Ralph, 2015). When I was doing my doctoral research on the knowledge production of gender at Women's Studies conferences (Henderson, 2016), including FWSA, conference delegates' caring responsibilities came up several times in interviews with participants. The backstory of different participants' trajectories towards attending the conferences that I was researching often involved negotiations about how childcare could cover the extra day or so, versus how much of the conference could be missed in order to not upset the balance at home. Some delegates had travelled with their children - some with no option than to do so, others to give their children an opportunity to see a new place. While children were the more evident caring responsibilities to manage, as I progressed in my research and began to deliberately notice how conference delegates manage their caring responsibilities when away, I noticed how partners also featured, and pets too. A keynote speaker at a conference I attended had her dog with her in the hotel, and a graduate student looked after the dog during the keynote itself.

Academic spaces are not known for their friendly, welcoming nature when it comes to caring responsibilities (Hook, 2016). The traditional model of the unfettered don is difficult to shake, and conferences are no exception. Some conferences include childcare facilities, and some institutions offer childcare bursaries for academics attending conferences, but these are solutions to the practical level of a structural issue. The fact is that conferences (and I am referring particularly to in-person conferences as opposed to virtual conferences) are designed in a way that precludes caring while at the conference. As a phenomenon it is difficult to see how they could be designed otherwise and still be conferences, as the short, intense, concentrated burst of intellectual-social engagement is what defines conferences as such. As I have written elsewhere (Henderson, 2017), there are many factors which prevent people from attending conferences, and from fully participating in conferences once there, including funding, work restrictions, border politics, dis/ability, and of course caring responsibilities (as noted by Gaia Charis in the February 2015 edition of the FWSA newsletter). However, formal and informal engagement in this research field so far has shown me that, while many people struggle to extract themselves from their everyday routines and locations to attend conferences, they do nonetheless engage in this struggle, and do place value in attending conferences. At times the fact of being at a conference is presented as a triumph, an escape, evidence that the individual's intellectual and social development can at times be put first. But for people with caring responsibilities, walling off that day or those few days completely is rarely an option - and is not necessarily a desirable option either. So what actually happens during the conference?

I have recently embarked on a new research project to explore this area of academic life and practice. It is a small-scale, exploratory study, funded by the University of Warwick's Research Development Fund, and I have called it '[In Two Places at Once: The Impact of Caring Responsibilities on Academics' Conference Participation](#)'. The study adopts a broad definition of care, which include children, parents and other relatives, pets, friends and kin - and I also try to capture the ways in which some caring responsibilities also provide support for other caring responsibilities (as in the case of a child also feeding the cat, for example). In the study, I am exploring how caring responsibilities impact on academics' (including students, researchers, teachers in higher education...) attendance of conferences - but I am particularly interested in how the experience of the conference unfolds while an academic is there - and if this differs for international travel. The project asks about strategies that people with caring responsibilities use to manage the practical and emotional challenges of attending conferences, the support that is available to them, and actually what managing care while at a conference involves. As such the project participants each focus on one conference (defined as at least a whole-day event) that they are attending, and they complete a questionnaire about their preparations for attending the conference, and a time-log which records the moments they communicate with or about their caring responsibilities, and when they think about them or talk about them while at the conference. This enables a focus on the idea of being 'in two places at once', and the lived experience of that phenomenon. I then conduct interviews with participants which use that one conference as a means of discussing their conference attendance in general. Since releasing the call for participants to a select few mailing lists and contacts, I have received emails from 60 people volunteering to take part, when I was hoping for 20. My funding does not allow me to interview more than 20 people (because of transcription costs), but I have decided to release the questionnaire and time-log to anyone who volunteers to take part, as a way of understanding as many people's experiences as possible.

If you would like to take part, and you are an academic (as defined above) have caring responsibilities (as defined above), and attending a conference before 17th July 2017, please email me. There is also a '[Reactions' page on the project website](#), so if you would like to write a short reaction about the project instead of participating, do get in touch. There will be an early findings event in London in July, and I will be facilitating a workshop on the project at the FWSA conference in September; if you would like to hear more about project events and findings, please email me to join the project mailing list. The project has been - and will be - developed with the input of a [stakeholder group](#) comprising representatives from academic associations (including FWSA) and researchers of academia and care.

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