

“Serendipity and Conference Attendance”

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Narrative Practitioner Conference, Keele University, 2009. I asked audience members to bring objects with them. In the photo, they are exchanging them with someone whom they do not know.

I remember quite well a major national disciplinary group’s annual conference in Birmingham that I attended some time ago now. We were kind of ‘outsiders’ at the time, but excited to present our government-funded project to this particular interest group. We thought that they might, indeed, be ‘interested’ in our project.

The presentation went well, but we were attending only for the first day, mostly because of the expense of the conference. At the day’s end I was waiting for my colleague in a seating area of the hotel’s lobby. I noticed a table with materials on it set up nearby and decided to investigate. As soon as I approached the area, a bloke came up to me and said, ‘You can’t be here. It’s for members only’. He pointed to a line on the carpet as some sort of barrier. The space was about to be turned into a cocktail do for the great and the good. I was astounded quite frankly. What a stupid, little club.

Years later, even after having accomplished a major project in their subject area, I still choose not to attend their annual conferences because of that experience.

I also remember early days as a PhD student and wanting to attend conferences to hear from and (hopefully) engage with as many of the big guns at the theoretical end of my field as possible. I had a modest amount of ESRC money annually for such activity, which meant budgeting and planning travel and accommodation carefully.

On one occasion, I took a ferry to Amsterdam, and then caught two trains packed mostly with local commuters, changing trains and platforms twice, to eventually arrive at the conference in Nijmegen. The opening night of the conference was astounding. They had a drinks and nosh welcome party with a Mariachi band. Now first, who came up with the idea of a Mariachi band (brilliant) and secondly, how

did they ever find one in Holland? Two key players in my PhD's method were presenting at the conference—one is a personal hero of mine. I got to hear and meet both of them. On this occasion as well, I had to leave a day early because I couldn't afford accommodation for the full conference.

I took a ferry another time, first to Hamburg, then caught the train to Berlin in order to present at a conference where my hero was again keynoting. He mentioned my presentation in his keynote. To me, it was like receiving an Academy Award as well as great encouragement to forge my own path and, at times, go it alone.

As my career progressed after completing my PhD, I found myself involved in planning and organising annual conferences myself. One of the first things I noticed was that most of the income from conference attendees' fees went towards flying in heavy hitters as keynotes and put them up in the style to which they had become accustomed. Although I realised the importance of these 'stars' of the field in attracting attendees, I also felt that more attention (and budget) might be paid to the conference 'experience' itself and what participants were getting for their money. (A Mariachi band?) For instance, were paying delegates given opportunities to interact with these academic heavy-hitters? Could we provide even more organised opportunities for conference participants to engage with each other? Audience involvement and ways to develop its potential became part of my theoretical development of a Performative Social Science from that point forward.

Lately, I mostly attend conferences as a keynote myself. I have become quite fussy about travel and accommodation arrangements and even joke that I come with a 'rider'. I fondly recall presenting at LSE recently. When asked why I liked that particular experience so much, I replied, 'Well, the marble floors and the handsome young men who offered me lunch, direct me to the hall and handled my technical needs'.

What is (still) most important to me even now, however, is how my presentations contribute to the conference experience for delegates. I try not to be a 'parachute' keynote, i.e., one that shows up, talks (usually reading from a PowerPoint) and leaves immediately following the presentation. (And how many Deans, VCs, etc. show up to open a conference in this way, then never bother to stick around to find out what the conference is really about?)

My favourite part of presenting is the Q & A that more often than not follows my contribution; I try to allow at least half of the allotted time for this. Nonetheless, a chance for a conversation over lunch or even a coffee is still the best bet. This is where communication really takes place, and what conferences should be all about, serendipitous encounters.

Previously posted as "Apparently, he comes with a rider these days" in the *Sociological Imagination*, 4 March 2015.