

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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“It’s Not Only me Doing Things for me”: Conference Participation for Doctoral Students with Caring Responsibilities

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Abstract: Conferences are recognised to be vital spaces for the development of doctoral students, providing access to networks and knowledge and socialising researchers into academia. At the same time, it is recognised that for academics with caring responsibilities attending conferences is challenging, and there are particular challenges for doctoral students with caring responsibilities. This paper focuses specifically on the tension between the heightened importance of conferences for doctoral students and the heightened challenges of care which accompany the financial constraints and precarity often associated with doctoral study. Drawing on the ‘In Two Places at Once’ project on access to conferences for academics with caring responsibilities, this chapter is based on the analysis of the participants who were doctoral students. Drawing on diary-interview data, the analysis focuses on aspects of negotiating conference attendance and care which are highlighted in participants’ accounts as specific to or exacerbated by being a doctoral student.

Paper: *Introduction*

Conferences are recognised to be vital spaces for the doctoral students, providing access to networks and knowledge, socialising researchers into academia (Chapman et al., 2009; Kuzhabekova & Temerbayeva, 2018; Fakunle et al., 2019). At the same time, it is recognised that attending conferences for academics with caring responsibilities is challenging (Henderson & Moreau, 2020); there are particular challenges for doctoral students with caring responsibilities (Hook 2016). This paper focuses on the tension between the heightened importance of conferences for doctoral students and the heightened challenges of care which accompany the financial constraints and precarity often associated with doctoral study.

Literature Review

Conferences are valuable spaces for academics to access new knowledge, develop collaborations for publications and projects and network (Rowe, 2018; Wang et al., 2017). This extends to doctoral students, but with an emphasis on the benefit of conferences for professional socialisation, development of doctoral work and gaining presenting experience (Chapman et al., 2009; Fakunle et al., 2019; Kuzhabekova and Temerbayeva, 2018; Subramanian, 2020; Thompson et al., 2012).

Conferences enter into the discussion of care and careers to illustrate academics juggling care and work. Examples include Thun (2019) noting that ‘planning for conferences abroad is a logistic puzzle’

(p. 8); Amsler and Motta (2019) reflect “‘It would be fine if I had a wife to look after the kids while I went to a conference’” (p. 89). There is very little literature that focuses directly on conferences and care (Bos et al., 2019; Lipton, 2019).

‘In Two Places at Once’

The study was an exploratory qualitative study entitled ‘In Two Places at Once: the Impact of Caring Responsibilities on Academics’ Conference Participation’ (Henderson et al., 2018). The study focused on academics who self-identified as academics and carers. For this paper, five participants who were doctoral students have been selected for analysis. The study used diary-interview method (Zimmerman and Wieder, 1977), where participants completed a care diary for one conference (Henderson, 2021). The five doctoral participants included in this chapter were all women, all based in the UK, though not all were British.

Portraits of doctoral carers attending conferences

In this section the participants are presented individually, with each portrait depicting a particular focus that emerged.

Portrait 1: Working from home or home-bound? P12’s doctoral status intersected with caring responsibilities in two ways: she avoided paying for extra days of childcare which could not be reimbursed using her doctoral funding, and she avoided attending events that exceeded her usual care schedule, which was itself dependent on her availability as a full-time funded doctoral student.

Portrait 2: Available to drop everything? P7’s account showed how full-time doctoral students can be seen as an available resource to be physically present for managing family crises, and how asserting a professional identity as a doctoral student can be challenging and difficult to sustain.

Portrait 3: Time and money running out. P2’s account was characterised by two eventualities: her conference funding being exhausted, and her stipend ending. The conference became a site of family financial investment where unrealistic expectations were placed on the conference. As P2 noted, ‘it’s not only me doing things for me’ (P2, interview); this conference was a family affair.

Portrait 4: Enhanced constraints as a sole parent/doctoral researcher. P14 showed how doctoral funding conditions are challenging for sole parents due to the lack of officially recognised income and the resultant lack of access to childcare support – as well as the issue of the doctoral stipend not being designed to support a family (Hook, 2016).

Portrait 5: Full-time academic, part-time doctoral student...and carer. This contrasting portrait is important as a reminder of the variation of ways in which doctoral studies combine with caring responsibilities. The concerns were relating to time pressure and the emotional guilt of managing the competing priorities of doctoral studies with academic work and family responsibility.

Discussion

While the challenges of attending conferences as a carer were similar to the challenges faced by all academic carers (Henderson et al., 2018), there were some specific facets that were specific to doctoral students. In particular, this related (i) to financial constraints relating to doctoral studentships and conference funding, and (ii) to expectations of doctoral student availability for

everyday care (with resultant reduced motility) and family crisis management. In relation to (i), there are considerations for doctoral research funders and institutions who disburse studentships and conference funding. In relation to (ii), the connection between availability, care and motility is a concern which is important to be aware of in structuring doctoral programmes.

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