

Queering the conference delegate: Disrupting the proper subject of academic mobility

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Conferences rarely take centre stage as a topic of discussion at their eponymous events. This paper takes advantage of the context of a Higher Education conference to briefly turn the spotlight onto academic conferences, firstly as important sites for Higher Education (HE) research, and secondly as potential sites for the queer theorisation of HE.

From the HE research literature, one could be forgiven for thinking that conferences do not have a bearing on the academic profession, as they have almost never formed the central focus of research. Where they are referred to in HE-specific literature, it is as a contributing element of, for example, globalisation (Smeby & Trondal, 2005). If we go further afield to find literature on conferences, there are a number of publications that focus on a particular conference as the site of an important historical moment for a discipline (eg. Carpay, 2001 for Psychology; Gibbons, 2012 for English). Whilst some of the conferences literature expounds on the nature and purpose of attending conferences (Hart, 1984; Hickson III, 2006; Skelton, 1997), in general there lacks a theorisation of academic conferences that specifically aims to contribute to the field of HE research (AUTHOR'S REFERENCE).

Since beginning the research upon which this paper draws, I have begun to record how often conferences are mentioned in academic literature, at events and in media sources, in conversation, on social media sites. People have also begun to approach me with stories of their experiences of conferences, often confessional anecdotes of discomfort and embarrassment. Even the anonymous peer reviewer of an article on this topic (AUTHOR'S REFERENCE) shared a recent controversial conference incident in their review notes! I have begun to construe conferences as a heavy silence in HE research. To address the silence, in this paper I offer a theorisation of conferences that applies queer theory to the notion of the academic conference delegate. The theorisation is based on autoethnographic (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) and ethnographic (Angrosino, 2007) data collected during an ESRC-funded doctoral project on interpretations and manifestations of gender and international HE, which involved fieldwork at three international Women's Studies conferences in UK, US and India. The autoethnographic data incorporates notes written at the time and retrospectively about my experiences at the conferences (AUTHOR'S REFERENCE), and the ethnographic data includes conversations with delegates, items collected from the conference, as well as field notes on incidents and sessions that I observed.

The idea of using queer theory to explore the notion of 'conference delegate' is situated in what Davis and Kollias term 'queer modes of inquiry', that is to say the use of 'queer' as a lens to look beyond 'LGBTQ [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans*, Queer] objects of intellectual inquiry' (2012, p. 141). Although this idea of a 'queer mode of inquiry' is not new (Britzman, 1995; Butler, 1993, cf Chapter 8 'Critically Queer'), it is a growing tendency in Queer Studies to use a queer lens to theorise settings that do not necessarily include people who identify as queer (Rasmussen & Allen, 2014; Talburt & Rasmussen, 2010). Given these growing tendencies in queer

research generally, it is time for ‘scholarship in HE’ to ‘interrogate itself queerly’ (Allen, 2013 n.p.). The queer lens is particularly useful for theorising the academic conference delegate because it seeks to ‘out’ social practices and conference rituals that are taken as ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ and to re-cast them as intentional and constructed.

The concept of ‘heteronormativity’ is an example of the theoretical process of taking what is naturalised and exploring its constructed nature. In a heteronormative environment, identities and practices associated with heterosexuality are considered so normal that they are invisible, while ‘other’ sexual identities and practices are termed ‘abnormal’, and so hyper-visible. If we turn the lens back onto heterosexual identities and practices, the ‘natural’ is re-framed as a heteronormative system that, whilst engineering its own disappearance, produces the ‘other’ as ‘unnatural’. At conferences, a series of standardised processes and conditions produces the role of a ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ conference delegate. Because these processes and conditions are common across international academic conference practice, they are almost unnoticeable, especially to the seasoned conference-goer, and yet they regulate the ways in which academic identities are constructed within conference environments.

The rituals of arriving at and participating in a conference construct the role of a proper delegate – each conference sets up its own temporary ‘world’, with accompanying sets of rules and logistics, relationships and habits. The proper delegate quickly learns how to inhabit this ‘world’, and this learning is accompanied by its own dissimulation. Where, when and how to eat, network, sleep, and attend sessions soon becomes natural and normal. Members of this world can recognise each other as ‘normal’ by the badges or lanyards that they wear, and the conference pack that they carry. It is difficult to see quite how constraining the normalised facets of the proper delegate role can be, until they are disrupted, until the delegate is ‘queered’. I have identified two ways in which delegates are queered by conferences. The first form of disruption is where there is a problem or a change in the logistics of the conference – for example, where the plates run out, or the keynote speaker cancels at the last moment. In this type of disruption, the conference is obliged to queer the delegates, in that the role of proper delegate changes to fit with emergency conditions, for example, using drinking cups as bowls or participating in an impromptu dance party. The second form of disruption is where the role of proper delegate is taken up and occupied, but is simultaneously experienced as unnatural. In this type of disruption, the role of delegate is queered by its occupant, who ‘passes’ as a proper delegate even whilst rebelling against it.

This nascent theorisation of the queering and queered role of conference delegate aims to both provide a conceptualisation of academic conferences, which has been lacking so far, and to contribute to the application of queer theory to Higher Education.

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