

Enculturation into academic culture through Active Participation in Professional Conferences

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Abstract: Research on academic cultures and specifically on the activity of attending conferences is sparse. The aim of this article is to describe the academic cultural activity of actively attending professional conferences and to provide novice researchers with structured guidance. The data is based on my own experiences of attending several conferences. The main goals of Active Participation in Professional Conferences (APPC) are to spread research results, gain insight from other researchers and their research, networking and, attaining merits. APPC is presented here as comprising three main phases: pre-conference preparation, on-site participation and post-conference review. In this study, APPC is viewed as an activity through which the identity of a researcher is socially constructed, involving disciplinary processes of being enculturated into the scientific culture, its norms and values.

Keywords: conference; education, graduate; ethnography; networking; performativity; students

At the beginning of my PhD-program, one of my supervisors told me that at least once during my degree program, I would need to participate in an international conference with an oral presentation. As a novice in the academic culture I had only a limited understanding of what was expected from me besides preparing my presentation. In this way, I was really an outsider to the academic culture. With my supervisor's voice in my head, I visualised myself standing in front of a full conference audience, presenting in a foreign language, using scientific-technical terms; the thought evoked high levels of anxiety. Shortly after my first article was accepted for publication, a senior doctoral student suggested I submit an abstract to a conference closely related to my research. Reluctantly, I submitted an application and later received an email from the conference committee that my abstract was accepted for an oral presentation. Eight months later, I found myself standing at a podium, facing a full audience to talk about my study on caring in intensive psychiatry. Fifteen minutes later, the presentation was over, I stepped down and returned to my seat. I felt pure energy running through my veins.

Similar to a sprinter who wins an Olympic gold medal, it goes without saying that the time spent on delivering a performance is only a small part of what leads to success. Preparation comprises the lion's share of total time exerted. I experienced a similar phenomenon when comparing the actual time of making my presentation with the total time spent on preparing to do so. After finishing the PhD-program I had the experience of attending ten conferences in various capacities. I had become acclimated to academic culture and the cultural activity of actively participating in professional conferences (APPC) through trial and error. Here I systematise my experiences and construct an ethnographic description of the cultural activity.

BACKGROUND:

The concept of culture can be defined as “*knowledge* that is learned and shared and that people use to generate behavior and interpret experience” (1, p. 5). In all cultures, people engage in different social events and activities and ascribe different values and feelings to these (2). The culture of academia is no exception. One academic activity is writing. Hartley (3) holds this activity is central in the scientific community, and further stresses that publishing is also associated with positive feelings, such as personal satisfaction and prestige. Another academic activity is spreading knowledge by attending professional conferences (cf. 4). The cultural activity of APPC involves mainly two presentation forms: oral presentations and poster presentations. A third form, workshops, is sometimes possible, but is excluded here as it is rare for junior researchers to lead this type of session. Although my experiences include APPC from poster presentations, this article will mainly focus on oral presentations.

Prior to writing this article, I searched for earlier published research on the topic of attending professional conferences and found only a few articles that focused on the learning experiences gained from APPC (5-7). In an ethnographic study addressing the question of how to become a scientist, Hunter, Laursen and Seymore (8) emphasise the value of engaging students in observing how researchers work beyond the walls of academia, to give students a better understanding of research as a professional practice. More recently Cherrstrom (9) wrote an article about her own experiences from attending professional conferences and highlighted the potential of making connections by networking with colleagues and seasoned professionals. However, in my experiences of meeting doctoral students, many of them express uncertainty and frequently ask questions about how to manage their behavior in relation to APPC. Similarly, earlier research indicates that those who

enter a doctoral program do not have a full understanding of what such a program entails (10). This underscores the rationale for conducting this systematization of self-experiences from APPC and to offer guidance on the process. The aim of this article was to describe the academic cultural activity of APPC and to provide structured guidance for novice researchers.

METHOD:

During my doctoral education I actively attended ten conferences and learned the activity of APPC in the academic culture – how to prepare, how to perform and how to review the participation retrospectively. As an ethnographer I have developed a keen sense of ‘seeing’ cultural phenomena – even in those cultures I regard to be my own, by continually reflecting upon my everyday life. In this article, the data is grounded in my own diaries from conference travels, email correspondence, photographs, slide presentations, certificates, conference abstract books, brochures, recollections of conversations with fellow participants, and different personal notes. This data was not originally intended as data for writing an article.

Nonetheless, I would argue that the fact that this was unintended lends trustworthiness to the data, in the same way suicide researchers stress that their subjects’ personal diaries, daily notes, reflections and personal notes are regarded as the most trustworthy data for answering the question of why people commit suicide since their communication with those surviving them was not intended for research purposes (11-13). I have organized and systematized the data. First, the different phases of APPC were identified through operationalization. This yielded a pool of cultural acts subordinated to the cultural activity as a whole. All acts were then sorted and ordered in chronological order and associated with cultural attributes in terms of people, artifacts, behaviors, values, beliefs, feelings, and goals (cf. 2,14). Single cultural acts were elaborated in descriptive text.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS:

As the data were not intended for research, no informed consent was obtained from those people I have encountered during my experiences of APPC. Rather, the data are treated as self-lived experiences of myself as a PhD-student and later on as a more experienced researcher. To avoid ethical issues, no e-mail correspondence or conversations are used in the presentation of the results and conferences by name and characteristics are distorted.

RESULTS:

The main goals of Active Participation in Professional Conferences (APPC) are to spread research results, gain inspiration and new insights from other researchers and their research, career building, networking and, for reasons of merit. In addition to these goals, APPC is also associated with personal benefits such as engaging in social activities, an opportunity to travel to foreign places. APPC consists of three main phases: *pre-conference preparation*, *on-site participation* and *post-conference review*. These are superior to several cultural acts (See Table 1).

Table: 1 Overview of themes and categories:

Categories	Sub-categories
A: Pre-conference Preparation: Eager at Home	A1. Locating a conference.
	A2. Submitting an abstract and having it be accepted.
	A3. Getting through registration.
	A4. Submitting published or unpublished material.
	A5. Applying for funding.
	A6. Preparing the manuscript.
	A7. Practice, practice and practice.
	A8. Managing practical issues.
	A9. Packing your material.
B: On-site participation: Being on the spot	B1. Speaker’s corner.
	B2. Getting familiar with the conference venue
	B3. Networking and mingling.
	B4. Participating at your session.
	B5. Questions.
	B6. Closing ceremony
C: Post-conference review: Back Home.	C1. Summing up
	C2. Presenting and reporting

A. Pre-conference Preparation: Eager at Home:

The preparation phase of APPC is the most varied phase and also the most time consuming. It extends over the longest period of time, as it can be up to one year between the time a conference is identified and the actual date of the event.

A1. Locating a conference:

The first step is to locate a conference of interest. As a doctoral student, it is common to receive conference announcements from supervisors or other administrators at the university. There are many different kinds of conferences, with more or less specified topics. A conference about for example “mental health” is likely to be multi-professional. However, if the name of the conference is called something like ‘14th Nursing Conference in Neonatal Care’, it is likely that it is aimed toward a single profession. It is advisable to register with one of several websites that track conferences, and receive alerts for potentially relevant upcoming conferences. It is advisable to actively search for relevant conferences using search engines like www.google.com or similar. Since my specific topic of research is acute and intensive psychiatric nursing I use search strings like ‘mental health’, ‘conference’, ‘congress’, ‘international’, and ‘[year]’.

The last string is worth noting. Let us say that it is late summer in 2014 and you search for a conference, it is then necessary to search for conferences during 2015 since the process from locating a conference to the date it takes place is often six months in advance or more. When locating a conference many factors must be considered to judge if the located conference is relevant. How many days are you able to be out of office on those dates? As an example, a fellow PhD student of mine was eager to submit a paper to a conference but it took place during her second week of holiday travel.

When estimating the value of submitting to a conference, it

is useful to reflect on the balance between the levels of 'input' and 'output'. A high level of output indicates that your research is highly relevant to the conference topic and is a good match, while a low level of output indicates that your research is less relevant to the conference topic. At the same time, high level of input indicates that the conference topic is highly relevant for your research area, implying that others' presentations will likely offer insight for your own work. Low level of input indicates that few conference presentations will be of interest for your own research. For example, I presented at a conference on safe societies where my presentation was about how psychiatric intensive ward cultures may contribute to safe hospitals. Many other presentations were about creating a safe society through building safe streets, school environments etc., which did not inspire my own research. At this conference, there was an imbalance between the level of output and level of input. Different strategies can be used to determine the level of input and output. First of all, the title of the conference gives a good indication. Second, the conference webpage typically offers a 'topics section'. Thirdly, even in the very early phase of conference announcements (maybe even prior to the submission stage) – keynote speakers are announced and it is possible to view a preliminary scientific program. A well-known and famous keynote speaker might be interesting for several reasons; keynote speakers may be a source of inspiration to your own work, an opportunity to present yourself and may be included in your research network. Also, if a keynote speaker is announced, who is relevant to your research, it is also likely that she or he is relevant to other researchers within your field. Once the conference of interest has been located and determined, the submitting phase begins. Conference webpages highlight 'Important dates', and conferences may be announced long before the submission window is opened. It is therefore advisable to note in your calendar a day that should be your submission day. Note that submitting as early as possible is preferable since submissions processes require different kinds of data, which you might need time to collect.

A2. Submitting an abstract and getting it accepted:

Submitting an abstract and hopefully getting it accepted, involves the cultural act of sending a short version, an abstract, of one of your published articles. After the submission window has closed, an organizing committee will be reviewing all the submitted abstracts. Submitting an abstract to a conference is an extensive process that requires effort and conformity with conference instructions and rules. The submission rules are similar to the rules for submitting a manuscript to a journal. It is likely that you will be asked to use a digital submission system. Submission systems usually present you with a step-by-step procedure, which can be extensive and time consuming. Often you will be prevented from progressing to a next step before the present step is correctly and fully completed. For example, you might be allowed a maximum of 20 words in the title and no more than 300 words in the abstract, both of which must be written in Times New Roman using 12 points, using specific headlines, also called a structured format. A general hint is to first register and study the platform, and write down on a separate sheet which information is asked for, collect the information and go back to the platform and copy/paste. I often got stuck on the 'affiliation'-box. You may also be asked to provide all names, addresses, phone numbers, etc.

It is important to fill this out correctly as some platforms do not allow you to change these later. So even though you are the presenter, or presumptive presenter, the first author of the article, and all authors' affiliations must be included. During my own PhD-program, I had three supervisors, some of whom changed their affiliations, titles, workplace, and in some cases, the institution name changed after re-organizations. During the submission process, it is possible to choose between two or sometimes three ways of presenting; oral presentation, poster presentation or sometimes, a workshop. After the submission process is completed you will receive an email that confirms your application.

A3. Getting through registration:

In connection with submitting an abstract you will be asked to simultaneously register. However, this is not necessary. Registration involves paying the conference fee. Often, the conference fee is slightly cheaper if you register and pay early, a so-called 'early-bird' rate. There is usually a matrix of different prices, a column for early registration, late registration and on-site registration, followed by several lines for variations in price for different countries, students, professions, and day rates for participation. "Early registration" may be up to four months before the conference, and a "late registration" may range between four months and up to one week before the conference. There is also a last option which is also the most expensive, "on-site registration". For example, the relationship between the three options may look like this: Early registration (\$650), late (\$500) and on-site (\$800). A student rate typically involves a discount of up to 50 per cent. To take advantage of a student discount your supervisor will need to write a letter confirming that you are a PhD student. Active participants are expected to pay a fee, unless they are personally invited to give a lecture. In the event you need to change your plans, a refund is most likely available, although the portion of the fee that is refunded usually decreases the closer a cancellation is to the conference date.

A4. Submitting published or unpublished material:

An issue that often raises questions is whether the abstract must refer to an already published study or if unpublished material from an ongoing study is acceptable. On some conference homepages, it is clearly stated that the abstract must refer to published material only. Ironically, some researchers with whom I have spoken claim that a presentation of published material is subject to approval by the journal or publisher that owns the rights to the article. Here it is beneficial to publish in Open Access journals, particularly those that leaves the full copyright of the author.

A5. Applying for funding:

Many PhD-students do not have earmarked money for conference participation in which case one must apply for funding. There are certainly many people who can be approached about support. You can ask your main supervisor and co-supervisor if they have any project funds or similar that could cover your costs. Even if they have not previously had access to such funds, they may well have received a recent grant that you do not know about. The next option is to ask the department chair, dean or similar. Having several contacts increases the likelihood of finding funding. An example of this was when I searched for a

conference in Istanbul, Turkey, and had consulted the Dean at the university but was refused because there was no more funding that year. During my PhD studies, I also worked at a hospital and approached my ward manager and was granted 1500 US dollars. A third option that also worked was when I had partial funding. I was granted funds to cover all costs except the ticket. I sent an email to the Chair at the department and asked for a supplemental grant to assist with both a poster and an oral presentation on the grounds that I actually would represent the university and the application was granted. A fourth option is to seek money through a union if you belong to one. A fifth option is to search for possible grants from foundations and private businesses. Private companies like to be seen as contributing to a good cause. A philosophy of mine is that the worst answer you can get is a no, and the alternative is a yes. However, time spent on applying for grants must be weighed in relation to the amount one can receive.

A6. Preparing the manuscript:

Preparing a manuscript can be time consuming. I have experienced good presentations containing elements of simplicity, humor and a clear message. Other presentations may be very instructive although the presentation itself may be less impressive. An important parameter is the length of time you are given to present. The most common length of a presentation is 20 minutes, including questions. I usually aim for seventeen minutes of presenting and three minutes for questions, although at one medical conference I was limited to only ten minutes including questions. It must be strongly emphasised that you should not exceed the time you are allotted as this leads to negative consequences for subsequent speakers or yourself.

In the design of a manuscript, it is useful to consider your audience, as well as what you want to say. If it is a general conference, for example general nursing, and your subject is specific, it is advisable to contextualise points, and keep to a general level while noting specific findings. For example, when I held a presentation at a conference for acute psychiatric nursing there was less need to contextualise and describe the main strands of psychiatric nursing theory. However, at another far more general conference focusing on safe communities, I could not assume that the audience was familiar with technical terms in nursing at all. I argue that it is more likely that the audience will listen and be interested if they are guided in a simple way through the project rather than being fed details about data collection and analysis. When presenting, I think your presentation should focus on your results and discussion. The results should also be followed by a summary consisting of a few sentences and the result should be stated in relation to a larger context, whereby you also discuss the relevance and meaning of the result. It is also a good idea to state how the results can be used or implemented in practice, what benefits there are for the public or what further research is needed.

The manuscript is usually written in English, and if this is not your first language, it makes sense to let someone with genuine English skills review the text and suggest improvements. My own experience of others' presentations is that those which are short and make succinct points are more valuable and more interesting than those that try to 'say everything'. One aspect of the art of presenting is to

speaking clearly and slowly. Even if you might have time to say a few hundred words more if you talk faster these will probably be lost, as the audience does not have time to pay attention and remain focused all the time. I aim to have 1000 words for a 10 minute presentation, to allow the audience to hear what I am saying, understand it, and process the information.

Your slides must, of course, be consistent with what you say, so that the verbal information correlates with the visual. I apply three rules of thumb. First, the less text on the slide, the better. Second, do not literally read what is on the slide. Third, a presentation is always more appealing to the audience with images and pictures that provide a basis for understanding empirical data. Whether you are talking about how to use anti-bacterial disinfection substances, nurturing encounters in elderly care or coercive measures in psychiatry, presentations will always be more alive if you offer a visual anchor. The presenters who have several hundred words of text on each slide or detailed tables tend to disappear in the crowd. In contrast, I saw a presenter who had a slide with Edvard Munch's "The Scream" plus a short text. This captured the content of the presentation in a much more familiar way and was very effective.

A7. Practice, practice and practice:

After writing the manuscript for your presentation and creating your slides, you need to rehearse your presentation over and over again. I recommend starting by reading it silently several times and then out loud, about 5-7 times. The next step is to test the presentation in a classroom or similar and tweak it several times. Each time I try to become less and less locked by my manuscript. I favor writing the text in 16-point size Times New Roman or any other normal font, and also using capital letters for headings. As a non-native English speaker, I always get stuck on some specific words or phrases in the text. Listening repeatedly to the word via an online dictionary can minimise this. Prior to the slide in question, mark this step clearly in the text. The text should be well-spaced and each page should end with a full sentence. A script can be 30 pages long for a 15-minute presentation. This facilitates and contributes to a slight pause in the presentation when changing pages. Another way to prepare yourself is to test the presentation on colleagues, for example either more formally at a research seminar or just gather a few colleagues.

A8. Managing practical issues:

A couple of weeks before departure, it is advisable to draw up a detailed timetable. This schedule should contain all essential data in one place or at least in a single plastic sleeve in chronological order. This schedule provides practical guidance and helps reduce unnecessary stress and external distractions that take energy away from your primary task. It may seem trite to write such a detailed plan, but I always thank myself for having written one because travel is easy when everything is under your control. About a week before the conference you should create a packing list and checklist. It can also be helpful at this stage to book transfers, shuttle buses, etc. Most likely, you are familiar with the transfer from your home to the local airport but likely not in the city you are about to travel to. You can always make it easy by taking a taxi, however this may be out of budget. It may be a little less expensive if you email

the hotel and ask if they can arrange transfers at a fixed price. Public transportation is usually about one-tenth the price of a taxi. Therefore, it is wise to visit the airport's website and read what transfer alternatives there are to the city center. In addition, look at the hotel's website to identify which metro station is closest and print out a map between the station and the hotel. There are of course also simpler solutions, such as using the GPS on a mobile device, but roaming charges can be costly.

A9. Packing your material:

Luggage may be lost, delayed or stolen. Therefore, all items that can affect your presentation, e.g. USB stick, manuscript, poster, etc., should be packed in your hand luggage. In fact, it is advisable to have an extra copy of your manuscript and a second USB stick with your slides, including overhead copies of your slides. As an additional security measure, it is advisable to email yourself the manuscript and slides to an account you can access from anywhere. This might not be an ideal solution as you can never be sure that there will be printers available at the conference center. The poster is more difficult to backup online since it is usually printed in advance. Conference facilities are rarely able to print larger formats than A4.

B. On-site participation: Being On the Spot:

Upon arrival you need to register. If you arrive just before opening there are usually long queues. At major conferences, queues are sometimes organised by first letter of last name, i.e. A-H, I-Q, R-Z. Upon registration, you receive a delegate bag containing things like a notepad, pen, conference program, sometimes an abstract book with a list of all presentations, and sometimes an overview map and a name tag you are expected to wear throughout the conference. Without your name tag you can be stopped by the conference hosts or guards. It is a good idea to sit down with a cup of coffee and go through the day's program, and organise a personal schedule for which parallel lectures to attend.

B1. Speaker's corner:

The next step is to locate and visit what is called the 'speaker's corner'. This is a technical department of the conference event. Speakers' corners may look different depending on the conference size. Sometimes it is only one person sitting at a table with a laptop, although at larger conferences it may be a large-sized room holding up to fifty computers and a dozen technical supporter people. No matter the size, the basic principle of the speaker's corner is to gather speakers and ensure they have uploaded their slides into the conference database. Presentations are then made available in the specific room at the specific time a speaker is scheduled to present. At a small conference, there may be many people in the queue behind you who are impatiently waiting for their turn. Therefore it is good to have an empty USB stick only holding the file that is relevant to the conference and named appropriately, e.g. "Surname, 13 October, Room 130, Speaker#3 ". Also, use only the letters A-Z and 0-9 to avoid errors if your name holds language-specific letters. When the file is uploaded technicians will test it to ensure it works with the conference software and to see if any screen adjustments must be made.

B2. Getting familiar with the conference venue:

After a final review of your slides, I think it is useful to visit the conference room where your lecture will be held in order to calm any nerves. This is best done during a coffee or lunch break when nobody is in the room. Take the opportunity to place your script on the podium and make sure there is room for two sheets of paper next to each other so you are able to scroll. A podium may seem daunting, large and formal particularly in larger halls. I think a podium is advantageous as no one sees your papers, you are sheltered behind a shield. Sometimes the podium is high and shorter people may find it difficult to look over it, in this case you might consider asking for a stepping stool or similar to stand on. There are also variants of halls for presentations. In larger halls the podium creates distance between you and the audience. However, in small rooms the first row of the audience might be sitting just a meter in front of you, in addition to being at the same height if you sit at a desk. If you are placed in a small conference room you may have the choice to sit down while presenting. Pedagogically, it is preferable to stand up - but, this also means that there is a greater distance between your gaze to the audience and to your script. A sitting position makes it easier to let your eyes wander from your script to the audience. Familiarizing yourself with the venue gives you the time to think through your position and approach.

B3. Networking and mingling:

During coffee breaks, lunch time, gala dinners, in the smoking area or any other places, there are always opportunities to network and make new contacts or for building relationships with others. The more related the conference theme is to your area of research the more important it is to network, especially if you are new. There are often 'big names' attending the conference, people whose work you have referenced. These people might seem to be busy and out of reach, but there is always time to meet the person and present yourself by name and area of interest. No matter how famous a researcher may be, everyone appreciates recognition for their scientific work. You never know what a short encounter might lead to. Networking tests your social skills and you may feel uncomfortable at first.

Sometimes it may be useful to network in groups because there is a greater chance that someone already has a connection and can act as an icebreaker for the rest of the group. A contradicting experience I had was at a conference on the topic of safe communities where I presented on security conditions in psychiatric care environments. During the coffee break, two men approached me and starting to talk, they represented the Fortification Agency of safe buildings. My immediate sense was that there was no common point between our fields. This was a learning situation for me because I stayed in the conversation to be polite, they asked about my research, and asked follow-up questions. I became stuck in conversation. In retrospect, I should have been polite, but should have moved on to make use of the time to network further with other people. There is an art to escaping a conversation without being rude. It is helpful to remember that it is not the person as such, but scientific interests and terms that suggest useful contacts. Accordingly, we do not personally break up and mingle on - it is professional. It is a good idea to have a short

introduction ready for spontaneous meetings with others. This is less stressful than finding a new way to briefly introduce yourself each time. Do not forget to share and exchange business cards and add people on social communities.

B4. Participating in your session:

It is advisable to arrive a bit early for your session. There are several people to greet, the technician, other presenters and the moderator or chairperson. The technicians are able to help you with various things, sometimes you may choose between using a hand-held microphone or headset. Some instructions may be valuable in order to quickly adopt the basic skills in managing how to move through your slides and use the laser pen. Even though the technical instructions and skills needed are basic, stage fright can make things more difficult. Often, the presenters gather around the technician and everyone wants to be clearly instructed, sometimes repeatedly on how to press forward in the slides. This is a useful situation to exchange some words with the other presenters and get to know them a bit. Since parallel sessions are typically organised so that each session follows a theme, for example, relatives' involvement in psychiatric care, this is perhaps the most important arena for networking. The moderator leads the session, and typically opens by welcoming everyone and giving a brief overview of the subject and sometimes presents the speakers. The moderator keeps track of time and moderates questions and discussion. When it is your turn, step up to the podium or desk and perform your presentation exactly as you have practiced. I have personally felt an impulse to improvise as nerves set in, but this seldom results in a better performance.

B5. Questions:

At the end of each presentation, the audience is able to ask questions as well as at the end of the whole session when a more general and overall discussion can take place on the session theme. Questions can vary and come from a range of subject areas. When dealing with questions it is a good idea to keep in mind why some people pose certain questions. First, there are those in the audience who want to emphasise their own expertise in the research area and refer to studies of their own, sometimes agreeing with your findings or just wanting to thank you for a good presentation. Other kinds of reactions from the audience might be less appreciated as they tend to say something in order to minimise your findings in relation to their own research - implying that you have missed important points in relation to the wider discourse. Such demonstrations of hierarchy and power orders may not be easy to deal with on the spot, especially those comments that do not exclusively refer to your presentation. Once a person in the audience posed a series of critical questions after my presentation, which were not of academic interest but from a clinical point of view. I answered by clarifying my findings in the results. The person kept asking follow up questions. To end the discussion, I stated that I had no data to answer those questions but emphasised that the person's points were important. Nursing researchers are often nurses by profession, but it is important to distinguish between those two roles. In the context of APPC you are representing the scientific community, as such you should not answer questions as a nurse, but as a nurse researcher.

B6. Closing ceremony:

At the very end of the last day, the conference is brought to an end by a closing-ceremony or similar. At this session, the conference organiser gathers some of the key persons. The closing ceremony includes some sort of conclusion on the topic of the conference and some closing remarks about the presenters at a high level. This is also an opportunity to more officially thank the conference organiser and the job they have done. The closing ceremony comes with some feelings of melancholy, you see all the people you have met over the preceding days in the halls and parallel sessions. Sadly, many participants do not attend the ceremony as many have to adhere to time schedules for travelling back home.

C. Post-conference Review: Back Home

Once back home, it is quite fun to visit the conference website after the event. I find it to be a bit nostalgic to see the web page in a rearview mirror perspective. The website still looks the same as before the conference, but it is now associated with a new meaning. However, even though the conference is over, there is still some work to be done.

C1. Summing up:

First of all, you should make an inventory of all the new contacts you made at the conference. Collect the business cards and file them. Even though you might not have any concrete plans for cooperation, it is a good idea to send each person an email and thank them. In this way it is more likely that they will remember you in the future. In addition, you may want to add people to social networking sites.

Another thing that is important in this post-conference review phase is to register your APPC. This means that you should add it to your CV. For some conferences, your name and presentation will be printed in an abstract book. This could also be included in your CV. Furthermore, do not forget to formally register your APPC in the institutional repository.

C2. Presenting and reporting:

You will have taken notes during sessions. It is a good idea to go through all these and structure them in ordered files and folders in your computer. I often get new ideas that inspire my own ongoing research and add important perspectives. Also, check for what date the next conference will be as conferences most often occur annually or bi-annually. Finally, you may want to report your perspective and experiences from the conference to your colleagues. Either in a verbal presentation at a meeting and/or a written report that you may want to publish in a journal.

DISCUSSION:

The purpose of this article was to describe the cultural activity of active participation in professional conferences (APPC) and to give guidance to novices. The results are presented according to the three main phases of the cultural activity, covering preparation, attending and participating and review. In the three phases there are several cultural acts that must be mastered. Ethnographers often promote several cultural concepts that are relevant when studying cultures, such as space and place, people, artifacts, behaviors, values, beliefs, acts, activities, feelings, and goals (cf. 2,14). In this

discussion, I will stress some of these ethnographic concepts.

The Cultural Meaning of APPC:

First of all, the results in this article form a description of the cultural activity in a wider perspective that extends beyond the specific cultural act of presenting. I argue that the meaning of APPC must be contextualised in a wider cultural context as the activity involves the enculturation of the novice into the academic culture. That is, the single cultural act of presenting becomes an act of performativity that transforms the novice into a cultural member of the academic society. The mediating performativity embodies the responsibility of spreading research results and communication within the research community. The performativity complements the activity of writing (cf. 3) in an important way as it exposes the researcher and the research to embodied critique as the performativity intersects with other researchers and their research. In accordance with my experiences, the impetus for defining APPC was a comment from an informant in a previous study: "I thought it was a great experience, seeing other people and then really talking to scientists. And I felt like I was really a part of everything because I had my own work that I could share" (8, p.52). As earlier research notes, many of those who enter a PhD-program are not fully aware of what the program entails (10).

I argue that APPC has the potential and benefit of shaping a person's identity as a researcher. However, just as Sweitzer (15) stress, it is important that the expectations placed upon novices and senior faculty members are clearly communicated in order to avoid confusion and frustrations. During the first stage of PhD-programs students learn to adapt to the language and discipline of academia as this stage represents the beginning identifying with the new role (16,17). I argue that APPC is likely to support such adaptation among novice researchers. However, being encultured is also associated with some sort of disciplining into a certain set of behaviors. Although APPC is localised to a certain place, it is at the same time a space where the novice's identity as a more senior researcher is being constructed, reshaped and disciplined into the scientific culture and its norms and values.

However, it is not only the case that APPC the novice is placed in a subordinated position for the purpose of disciplining him or her. The novice also claims a certain space through performativity. To view this reciprocal adaptation between the novice and the academic culture it is useful to quote Tuan (18) "Not only do people make spaces, but spaces may be used to make people" (p.202). In a wider perspective, the 'space' extends far beyond the place since the 'making of people' includes the dimension of time that stretches prior to and after the actual event of the conference and the venue. For example, when I located conferences online, I had to spend time to locate these. However, as a more experienced researcher most conferences locate me through email lists, and some invite me to participate as a result of my earlier APPC. This reversed relationship also comes with dissolved boundaries and far fewer disciplining routines. As a novice you are disciplined into following certain rules when submitting to a conference. You are obligated to fill out the application and stick to a format set

by the conference organisers, stick to deadlines, book hotels, pay the conference fee and wait for the conference committee to review your application. In this sense, the novice is the underdog and is subordinate to cultural artifacts, norms and values (cf. 19,20).

As I described in the introduction, one of my supervisors expected me to actively attend conferences and this involved emotions of anxiety in my novice body as a PhD-student. Unfortunately, my supervisor was unable to identify with and supervise me on how to manage these feelings. The stages of APPC have different cultural meanings and are associated with emotions. While the preparation phase of locating a conference and gaining an accept for an oral presentation is associated with feelings of eagerness and empowerment, the phase of being on site coming closer to the time of presenting can be more associated with anxiety and fear. As I observed, the academic culture that I have engaged in does not make space for students to express such feelings in formal settings. I argue that the transition of being enculturated via APPC could be less stressful and more useful by introducing briefing and debriefing sessions. My sense that these forums are lacking is supported by the lack of research on this topic. As we care for patients, either as clinicians or as researchers, as nurses, social workers, or any other healthcare professionals, a fundamental element of caring is to recognise others by actively engaging in relationships. I argue that these dimensions of care could be improved such that supervisors can better assist in enculturating novice students in PhD-programs.

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