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The Art of Conferencing

Melanie-Angela Neuilly and Mary K. Stohr

While for most in academia conferences only occupy a fraction of the year, they encapsulate the essence of an academic life. Indeed, even though many would think of conferences as being solely in the realm of scholarship, they also involve the other two aspects of our jobs: teaching and service. In this article, we endeavor to tell with our two voices a tale of the importance of academic conferences in one's career. Including some first-person perspectives, we outline the structure and extant research on our conferences and the professional organizations from which they stem, propose some tips on giving good presentations and performing service, as well as underscore the importance of developing and maintaining strong ties with our peers and colleagues, while taking advantage of the traveling conferences allows us to get under our belts. We conclude with some general recommendations for successful conferencing throughout the academic lifetime.

The opportunity to learn from others is the main reason for attending conferences. (Gennaro Vito's ACJS Presidential Address published in *Justice Quarterly* [1999], p. 15)

Introduction

If your life is like ours, you spend most of your work year communicating your knowledge. But while most of the time your audience is made of undergraduate or graduate students, or maybe sometimes policy-makers or practitioners, it is only a small portion of the time that the audience is made up of your colleagues and peers. This is one of the reasons why conferences are a wholly different experience for us. As the quote from Gerry Vito, featured above, indicates, at conferences, we get a chance to learn from others. That learning can be about the latest research in our discipline, the best practices of those in the field, or the most effective pedagogical techniques. In addition, because we are human, we also tend to gab with old and new friends about challenges faced by our discipline, in our departments, or by ourselves. We might also gossip about the goings and comings of our disciplinary colleagues across the

country, about, and with, students old and new and just generally relax with others like us.

Conferences, though they are expensive, take precious time away from projects and the classroom, and can be exhausting physically and emotionally—because of all the interaction and the need to “be on” for presentations—are also an invaluable reprieve from the daily routines of our lives. Routines, while comforting and stable, can be stultifying. Creativity germinates when routines are disrupted and there is concentrated exposure to new ideas, innovations, and people. Conferences provide just this space for the admixture of ideas and research, presented by bright and engaged people, spurring the imagination, and with the hope of advancing the discipline.

In this paper we—two academicians, one early to mid-career, Melanie-Angela Neuilly, and one mid- to late career, Mary K. Stohr—relate our experience with conferences and conference organizations. Melanie’s primary experience is with the American Society of Criminology (ASC), though she also attends some Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences (ACJS) conferences, and Mary’s primary experience is with ACJS, though she attends some ASC conferences. The advantage of including our two perspectives on conferences in our discipline is that it allows us to examine two crucial moments in academics’ lives and the role conferences can play at these times. Our perspectives coalesce around the idea that both academic conferences and academic careers are concerned with the same three things: intellectual enrichment, otherwise broadly known as scholarship, mentoring, which is part of teaching, and service, this particular kind being to our discipline instead of our academic institutions. And even though scholarship, teaching, and service structure our entire professional lives, conferences allow us to do these things while catching up with friends in a new environment. We start by framing our conference life in light of our first conferences; we then move on to discuss the structure of our professional organizations as well as the extant literature on our discipline. The body of our article focuses on the importance of giving good presentations as well as getting engaged in service, while connecting with our peers (and enjoying the scenery), and we conclude with some general recommendations on how to make the most out of any conference.

Our Formative Conference Years

Melanie’s First Time

I remember my first ASC, in 2002, second year of graduate school at Rutgers University’s School of Criminal Justice, in a blistering cold Chicago November. A friend and I opted to stay in a youth hostel, some 40 min away by L from the fancy conference hotel we could not afford. We were both broker than broke, as graduate students often are, and we both had broken hearts, another constant of my younger years. I had attended a couple of conferences before, but

none this big, and none in criminology or criminal justice. I was not in Chicago to present, I was there to observe, figure it out, so that I would be ready when my turn came to participate, which was to be the following year, in Denver. I have since then attended 25 conferences, some regional, some international, and most national. I have gone by myself, with friends, with my husband, and recently, with my baby. I have been a lead presenter, panel moderator, Principal Investigator leading a team, supportive audience member, and critical audience member; I have taken graduate and undergraduate students, been there as sole, first, second or third author, etc. While there are still many roles and experiences I am looking forward to for the still long conference-going years ahead of me, I have, since that first ASC, honed my skills as a conference attendee.

When I first started going to academic conferences, I had to find my marks. I had to attend everything, cram as many panels in my days as possible, go to every single social event, and figure out who was who and what was what. This quickly became exhausting and I retreated to the famed graduate student strategy: going to all of your friends' panels as a supportive audience member.

This rookie strategy taught me some valuable lessons. First, by overinvesting in my conference experience, I did learn the lay of the land, which allowed me to feel more confident and know my way around ASC and ACJS conferences very quickly. Second, I realized that not all panels are created equal. Just because a panel title sounds interesting, does not mean the research presented will be good. I have since then learned to vet my panels of interest in advance. This has become easier as I have developed a stronger knowledge of our discipline, its actors, and its code words, in part because of my first lesson learned. This has made my conference experience much more purposive and intellectually enriching. Third, I eventually stopped going to all of my friends' panels because, for one, now that I am not seeing them at school every day, I would much rather see them in a more social environment than quietly sit and listen to their research, which I may or may not have a personal interest in (more on reuniting with my academic tribe later). Additionally, not only do I now have even more friends than before, making attending all of their panels nearly impossible, but I have graduate students, and they need my attention and guidance, unlike my old graduate school buddies (more on graduate students later).

Soon enough (even though it felt like it was ages), I was on the job market, and the conference circuit took on a very different tone. It was no longer about passively receiving information in panel after panel, or being a good friend having fun in a different town; it was about networking and projecting the image of the professional I wanted to become. It involved attending panels of faculty members at departments where I was applying for positions, behaving with much less abandon than I previously had, and replacing some of my panel attendance or social events with informal or formal interviews. It also involved giving the most polished presentation I had given so far. It was then that I realized that what others thought of me in such circumstances mattered very much (more on good presentations later).

Moving toward my mid-career, I am now finding my stride as a conference goer, or at least I was before I had a baby ... In a parenting criminological academic couple, solutions for conference attendance have to be carefully crafted. My recent conferencing has involved some high-level logistical orchestration of "pass the baby" (and a lot of finger crossing that my husband's and my panels would not be scheduled at the same time). As I have moved further along in my career and have shifted the emphasis of my conference going to include more student mentoring than it did before, I find that my being a mother has played a role in reinforcing that nurturing aspect of my job. This has not come without frustrations though, as I have found it more difficult not just to socialize with my tribe (even though the presence of other young children in my group of friends is always fun for my child and a comfort to me), but more importantly, to engage in the intellectual pursuit and truly "conference," as my husband puts it. It was at ACJS, in Orlando in March 2015, that we decided that it would be several years until our child would conference with us again if we could help it at all...

My goal with this trip through memory lane is to illustrate the ever-changing role conferences can and should play in one's academic career, as well as their ever-changing characteristics. In graduate school, conferences were a way for me to get my feet wet, figure our field out, but also have fun, lots and lots of fun. On the job market, conferences were an important tool to promote myself and network. As a junior faculty member, they became a true occasion for intellectual enrichment, a refreshing breath of fresh scholarship in the midst of the doldrums of busy semesters. Moving into my mid-career, I have shifted my emphasis toward mentoring graduate students and leading research teams, while struggling to balance parenting responsibilities with my thirst for enlightenment. With each transition comes mourning of the eras past, but excitement and the anticipation of what is yet to come. And through all of this, lessons learned have helped me establish healthy habits and a general professional framework, which I will delve into throughout the remainder of this paper, but not before I yield the floor to my esteemed colleague Mary K. Stohr.

Mary's First Time

My first presentation at an academic conference was at the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences meeting in St. Louis, Missouri in 1987. I was a second-semester master's student in Criminal Justice at Washington State University and thankfully I was co-presenting with my master's degree mentors, then doctoral student Linda Zupan and Dr. Ben Menke. Linda and I took the train from Spokane, Washington to St. Louis and since we could not afford a sleeper car for more than one night (out of the six on that roundtrip), we sort of slept in the seats and arrived rumpled and very tired, which didn't stop us from enjoying all of the social events the conference had to offer!

The topic of our paper was “Doing Time in the New Generation Jail: Inmate Perceptions of Gains and Losses.” The paper was co-authored with Linda and became the basis for my master’s thesis. On that paper panel were other jail researchers, who I came to know over many years (e.g. Joel Thompson and Larry Mays—who edited a special edition of the *Policy Studies Review* where all of our papers from this panel were published—Mark Pogrebin and Eric Poole, Thomas Winfree, Dave Kalinich, Todd Clear, and Linda and Ben with another paper). The truth is, I do not remember much about that presentation or who presented papers on the panel (though all of the above people did publish in that special edition) as I was so scared and was desperately trying to keep my cool and do my small part of the presentation (thankfully my co-presenters restricted me to five minutes of mumbling).

One thing I do remember about that presentation is that Ken Kerle (then the Managing Editor of the *American Jails Magazine* and perhaps the most knowledgeable person on earth with regards to jail operation and research, then and now) was in the audience and stood up to ask questions. Over the 28 years of membership and attendance at every ACJS conference, I came to know many of these people on my panel quite well as I ended up getting my first job at New Mexico State University, where Larry Mays was chair and Tom Winfree worked, have written on parallel tracks with Mark Pogrebin, Todd Clear, and Dave Kalinich (and have served on boards and other panels with them). I have seen and interacted with all of them at many ACJS conferences over the years. After that presentation, I met Marilyn Chandler-Ford and she and I also have in common our interest in jail research (she has been a progressive jail manager in Florida for years). Eventually, we served together on the Executive Board of ACJS and I followed in her footsteps, and was assisted by her, when I became Treasurer of the Academy. But my most important long-term relationship from this first panel turned out to be the one I formed with Ken Kerle. Ken’s questions from the audience were impassioned as he argued for building a bridge between the academic and practitioner worlds, something that became a significant part of his life’s work. When Ken still worked at the magazine, and at his urging, I published/reprinted 10 different articles at the magazine and would periodically call him with questions or research ideas. He referred me to practitioners and scholars who could aid me in my research. He did this for many researchers/practitioners in the Academy other than just me. He attended the Western and Pacific Association of Criminal Justice Educators (later renamed as the Western Association of Criminal Justice), a regional organization affiliated with ACJS, when my husband and I were officers in it and he even came over to dinner one time when he was in Boise, Idaho, when we worked at Boise State University.

The point of this story, and some of this shameless name dropping, is that at any given time, a conference panel has the power to shift your focus and take you down research paths you never expected. Organizations such as ACJS provide opportunities at their national meetings, and within the more intimate confines of panel presentations, to make important connections with people

doing research, or engaged in practice, in the same areas that you are. You may even find your tribe, or people who are like-minded in their research or practice focus. Or just the connection with these people may serve to shift your own focus to another area of research and to chart, or re-chart, your future in academe or the world of practice. This is what happened to me my first time at ACJS and it is something that has happened again and again at other ACJS meetings (but more about this in the following).

Regional Organizations of the Academy

Another formative “first time” for me (Mary Stohr) at an academic meeting was the first several times I attended regional meetings in our discipline. The first was the Southwestern Association of Criminal Justice—when I was a brand new Ph.D. and was working at my first job at New Mexico State University. Though the presentation title is on my vita—“Something New Under the Corrections Sun: The Unique Combination of Old Ideas to Fashion a Significant Policy Innovation”—I would be hard-pressed to remember its content. But I do remember meeting a number of people from the area (particularly people from Sam Houston State University with whom I kept in contact for several years) at that Southwestern meeting and the one the following year. After I moved back to the Pacific Northwest in 1994 to teach at Boise State University, I began attending the Western and Pacific Association of Criminal Justice Educators (now the Western Association of Criminal Justice). At that meeting, I met people who were to be my regional friends for years, including Faith Lutze, David Mueller and Andrew Giacomazzi, Trey Williams, and Marilyn McShane, among many others. Trey encouraged my husband Craig Hemmens and me to run for leadership positions in WACJ, David and Andy eventually became colleagues at BSU and after many years and another university in between (Missouri State University), my husband and I joined Washington State University and became colleagues with Faith after being friends with her for over 20 years.

This regional leadership involvement, along with the work for the sections and on a number of other committees at ACJS (more about this later), eventually led to running for the ACJS Executive Board as a regional trustee in 1998 (Donna Hale encouraged both Lynette Lee and me to run for different positions). The Trustee position exposed me to the workings of the board and piqued my interest in further service and as a result, I ran for Treasurer of the Academy in 2002 and again in 2005. After these terms were done, and after a few years off the board, I applied for Executive Director of ACJS (more about this later). So there is a straight line between my formative experiences at ACJS and regional meetings and the friends and colleagues met there, not to mention positions that I have held in our discipline.

Since becoming ACJS Executive Director, I have had the pleasure of attending all of the other regional meetings—The Northeastern Association of Criminal Justice Sciences, the Southern Criminal Justice Association, and the

Midwestern Criminal Justice Association—and though those organizations are larger than both the Southwestern and the Western, the basic experience is very similar. Other than the wonderful career connections one makes at regional meetings, they also are places which are more relaxed and friendly in that all of the presentations are in one to five rooms (depending on the size of the regional meeting). Because you tend to see the same people at different panels or functions, you come to know them and to make new friends and colleagues in the discipline.

There is less balkanization of ideas and research at regional organizations, which enhances creativity, not to mention appreciation for the work of one's colleagues. What this means is that people tend to be exposed to research and presenters that they normally would not be at a larger meeting. Police scholars will tend to hear presentations on correctional research and academicians specializing in courts and law will become familiar with the predominant theories of crime.

Research on the Discipline and Organizational Operation for ACJS and ASC

One central function of ACJS has been the publication of its journals. *Justice Quarterly's* first edition was in 1984 (before JQ, the *Journal of Criminal Justice* was the official journal of ACJS from 1976 to 1983) and the *Journal of Criminal Justice Education's* first issue was published in 1990. Though both journals publish top-notch theoretical and/or practice-based research, they also are charged with publishing research and commentary (in the form of Presidential Addresses in JQ) on the discipline and the organization (in JCJE). In this section, we provide a quick review of some of the most salient of this research as it contextualizes our discipline and where we locate the Academy in it.

In his President's Message at the beginning of the first volume and issue of the *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, Latessa (1990) and Flanagan (1990) in his Editor's Comments in that same edition noted the robust nature of our discipline at that time—its popularity among students and its growth as a major in colleges and universities. They also reviewed its concomitant challenges—perception that it is a vocation, rather than a social science, and the dearth in funding of our discipline. They heralded the need to study the criminal justice/criminology discipline and the contribution that JCJE could make in publishing those studies. And as it turns out, the best research on the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences membership, organizational, and conference operations can be found in both of the Academy journals, the *Journal of Criminal Justice Education* and *Justice Quarterly*.

In their 1994 article in JCJE, Sorensen, Widmayer, and Scarpitti examined the memberships of both ACJS and the American Society of Criminology (ASC). They found that there were some differences between the members of these organizations, but there was evidence of a convergence in perspective, one

which recognized both the value of practice and research. Gennaro Vito's 1999 Presidential Address in *Justice Quarterly* explores the role of ACJS in terms of promoting research. He describes how difficult it is to transmit knowledge to students (e.g. theory and methods) and to policy-makers and practitioners (e.g. research) when they do not see its relevance. In her ACJS Presidential Address (published in *Justice Quarterly*), Merlo (2000) urged Academy members to become involved in the then trending move to greater prevention, early intervention, and rehabilitation for wayward youth and away from punishment. Todd Clear, in his Presidential Address, published in *Justice Quarterly* in 2001, contemplates whether Criminal Justice is a distinct discipline in comparison to other social sciences. After a careful review of graduation data, curricula vitae, and research, Clear concludes that it is, that Criminal Justice has in fact arrived as a discipline.

One indication of that was the establishment of certification by the Academy. As Southerland, Merlo, Robinson, Benekos, and Albanese (2007) detail in their JCJE article on the subject, certification and standards are one of the best ways for the discipline to ensure there is quality in criminal justice higher education.

But all is not perfect in the development of a discipline or the delivery of a conference. By 2015, or in the 10 years since certification was approved by the Executive Board of ACJS, only 13 programs had completed the certification process. After the standards and the process were revamped over the course of the last few years (2013–2014), more interest and applications for certification have been processed, but it is slow going. Mueller, Giacomazzi, and Wada (2004) in their study of panel chair's perceptions of the ACJS conference experience also unearthed some problems with the conference delivery. In their JCJE article, they noted that though overall the chairs regarded the experience as positive, they were less than pleased about the perennial problems with panelist attendance and presentation etiquette. Gilbert and Tatus (1999) caution that the experiences of African-American women, or other minority group members, in criminal justice/criminology departments cannot always be characterized as supportive. Frost and Clear (2007) note that doctoral production in criminal justice/criminology does not yet meet the criteria from the National Research Council for a discipline in the NRC's taxonomy. And in a study by Pfeifer, Alarid, Sims, and Palacios (2014), all ACJS program chairs of recent vintage, the researchers found that absentee and no-call/no-show presenters at the national conference continue to bedevil attendees expecting more.

Nevertheless, participation in a national conference in the Criminal Justice/Criminology discipline, whether that be ACJS or ASC, is a highly valuable experience, and not just for the attainment of knowledge and the social factors mentioned in other sections of this paper. Research by Applegate, Cable, and Sitren (2009), presented in JCJE, indicates that for prospective job applicants at least, presentations at conferences are one of the main considerations by employers of academics. So it is important not just to do research and publish it, but to present it.

Presenting Research, Participating in Roundtables or Workshops

Research on the quality of conferences in our field has mostly focused on ACJS meetings (Friedrichs, 1982; Hale, Austin, Firey, & Smykla, 1999; Mueller et al., 2004; Pfeifer, Alarid, Sims, & Palacios, 2014), and despite finding most surveyed are satisfied with the quality of the conferences, significant problems exist regarding panel no-shows and poorly prepared presenters. For conference goers, the recipe to the first problem is simple: show up to your panel! This is very important because research shows that conference presentations are important for one's career (Applegate et al., 2009). But showing up is not enough. Showing up prepared is the key, and speaking from experience, giving a good presentation seriously enhances one's conference experience.

While studying what makes a good presentation is not within the purview of criminal justice and criminology research, years of experience, both listening to and preparing for presentations, have led me (Melanie) to some tried and true tricks. That said, you do not have to take my word for it, as a quick Google search of "How to give good presentations" returns plenty of advice, and entire textbooks can be found if one were inclined to truly hone their public speaking skills (see, for example, Schwarze, S. (2011), *Speaking in the Public Sphere*, New York: Pearson, or Hostetler, M., Kahl, M. (2011). *Advanced Public Speaking: A Leader's Guide*, London: Routledge).

So let us start at the beginning: in order to give a good presentation, you need to have a good idea, and you need to have all the material that you will be presenting on ready. This means you need to have completed the research you are presenting, and ideally have your paper written up (and if Pfeifer, Alarid, Sims, and Palacios' (2014) recommendations get implemented, this might become a reality at least for ACJS). Indeed, no one can give a good presentation on partial results or a review of the literature. At the risk of being overly repetitive, the main reason we go to conferences is to learn from others (Vito, 1999), and if we do not show up prepared, that knowledge sharing will not happen.

With that said, let us assume we have done the research and written it up in a paper; there are a few simple key elements in giving good, solid presentations. First, you need to find a good way to tell your story; then, you need to figure out the best visual support for your narrative; thirdly, you need to find your actual voice; and finally, you need to manage your time. The first element is truly the key to good presentations. In criminal justice and criminology, we tend to rely on formulas and just go through the motions: here is the research question, the review of the literature, the methods, the results, and the discussion/conclusion. While this might provide a good framework to outline our work, it falls short of telling a good story. When giving an oral presentation of our work, we have to keep two things in mind: we have much less time to expand on our ideas than in a written format, and we have to capture people's attention because they cannot simply take their time reading our

printed words. This means we have to condense what is a 20–30-pages paper into a short 10–15 min story line, and do so in a way that will be easy for our audience to grasp. So focus on telling a story: find a hook in the topic, develop it into a larger narrative arc, and take it to a resolution. Why are you doing research on your particular topic? What got you interested in this topic, this method, or this problem to begin with? Once you have found your story, it will guide you throughout your presentation and keep you on track.

There are many ways to visually illustrate your story, and PowerPoint certainly is the most commonly used program for that. While we can criticize our over-reliance on PowerPoint slides and other types of visual aids, the truth is, we simply no longer exist in a world when one can just stand in front of a crowd and talk without a screen at their back. When it comes to conference presentations, we have to convey a level of information that is complex and thus often needs visual illustration, whether we are discussing concept maps or regression slopes. The key to good visual support, though, rests on finding the balance of providing just enough information to help the audience follow your train of thought without distracting them from listening to you. This means having just enough slides, just enough text, and just enough images/charts/graphs, and presenting those in a simple, streamlined, elegant, and coherent way. I always remind my students that dark lettering on a white or light background slide makes it look like the words are dancing on the slide after a while of staring, so I advise a dark background with lighter lettering to avoid this dizzying visual trick. Entire sentences should be avoided as the human brain automatically wants to read them. Short bullet points, graphs, or images should be favored as they can easily convey ideas without clogging the mind. Additionally, this trick also helps the presenter avoid a big presentation pitfall: reading from the slides. And in the name of all things rational, limit animations to meaningful things, and avoid distracting little sound effects!

The perfect-looking slides supporting the best story will only take you as far as your story-telling can take you. It is thus important to remember a few tricks from your communications 101 class back in college: when speaking publicly, stand up (sitting will only impede your overall energy and your ability to project your voice correctly), never read from your notes (or the slides, as mentioned above), always make eye contact with your audience (but do not stare at one person only, that is weird), and regulate both the volume (you want to speak loud enough so that everyone in the room can comfortably hear you, but not yell at them), cadence (be mindful of “uptalk,” for example, the annoying habit of ending sentences in an interrogative intonation), and speed (regional variations are to be taken into consideration, just as you should account for your case of nerves) of your elocution. Avoid hum-ing, huh-ing, and like-ing throughout (those are some of the hardest things to get rid of when speaking in public, but if you can master that, it will go a long way in improving your presentation skills).

Finally, manage your time. Poor time management is a recurring theme in ACJS panel chair surveys throughout the years (Pfeifer et al., 2014). Going over

time is not only rude to your fellow panel members, but it also portrays inadequate preparation and a limited mastery of your research. Once you have a good story, some good visual support, and a good speech, it is very easy to make sure to stay within your allotted time. Indeed, all of the things that make a good presentation require preparation and practice, and it is mostly through practice that you will learn to respect your time limit. Aside from practice, a few things really help: do not have too many slides, or try to cram too much information into your presentation. I generally advise my students to prepare no more than 10 slides. You can always add slides at the end with extra information which you can go to if you have time or if questions arise after presentations are done. Additionally, do not simply memorize your speech because if you end up running out of time, it will make it very hard for you to skip some information in order to finish up quickly. It is very important you practice your speech in a fluid fashion, so you can jump a few slides forward if need be. The key to doing this is to remember what your overarching story is, and to identify a few key points to memorize for each slide, as well as the transitions from one slide to the next (they can be fully formed sentences if you want to make sure to sound extra-articulate).

Giving a good presentation is something I (Melanie) do spend quite a bit of time thinking about and preparing for, but it is also something that I incorporate in my mentoring of graduate students. If we are to continuously improve the quality of our professional conferences, our responsibility goes beyond making sure we, ourselves, give good presentations. For those of us who are faculty, it is our responsibility to mentor students through the process of preparing for good presentations. Conferences offer a unique setting for mentoring. Indeed, they are the perfect occasion to mentor students on their research skills, both in terms of conducting original research and presenting it, as well as on their road to professionalization. As a mentor, I find that the time I devote to preparing for conferences ends up stretched out throughout most of the year: first, as I encourage students to think of research ideas with a conference timeline in mind, second, as I guide them through the actual research process, third, as I prepare them for their presentation through rounds of mock panels (our home institution also requires a preconference presentation before faculty and other graduate students as a prerequisite for travel funding for graduate students), and finally, as I assist them throughout their conference experience, especially if it is their first one. Mentoring students through the conference process not only ensures the overall quality of the conferences is strengthened, but also benefits students in their professionalization and their employment prospects.

Indeed, once you have your great presentation, not only will you feel much more relaxed about your entire conference experience, you will also maximize the likelihood that you will be getting insightful feedback and provocative questions, as well as make interesting and useful connections. Conference presentations are our calling cards, our way to introduce not just our research, but ourselves. A polished presentation will ensure people know what you do,

and hopefully will attract interest in it, which can open doors to collaborations, funding opportunities, or policy changes. Additionally, being adequately prepared for your conference presentation will free your conference time to further engage with your peers and colleagues by going to panels, discussing research ideas, while also participating in serving the organization.

Service to National Organizations

Doing service for your regional or national academic organization will not get you tenure. If you are a professor on the tenure track, it will not get you promoted at your university to Associate or Full professor. On its face, service will not formally assist you in your career in any way. In fact, there might even be supervisors at your university or agency who discourage you from doing service for “outside” (outside the university or community) organizations such as ACJS or ASC.

But informally, service to these organizations, in tandem with publishing on a regular basis for the academics among us, made my (Mary’s) career. It is also the right thing to do. If people do not step up and do service for their academic organizations, conferences would not happen, or be well arranged, as 90% of what happens there is made possible through the labor of volunteers. Volunteers collect and organize submitted papers into panels/workshops/roundtables, they run the program committee and all the other standing and ad hoc committees for the organization, they run sections and divisions, they sit on boards, they lead organizations, they do reviews for journals owned by those organizations, and they act as editors of those journals (yes there is pay for editors and even some acclaim, but the pay is nominal in comparison to the work required).

From a personal perspective, most of my contacts in the discipline have been made by doing service for the conference organizations, specifically for ACJS national or the western regional conference organization. Most of those contacts were solidified when I worked with people on committees, newsletters, boards, programs, sections, etc. for those organizations. Service activity for ACJS began very early in my career (Ph.D. earned in 1990) and continues to this day.

Those contacts made through service have personally helped me in numerous ways. It is because of them that I have had the opportunity to serve on journal boards, as a reviewer of grant applications for the National Institute of Justice, and as a special editor of a journal. It is because of them that I came to know and do research with academicians engaged in similar scholarship across the country. It is because of them that I had academic friends in other departments around the country when I needed them (when there was discord in my own university or department, I always had a broader group of colleagues to reach out to). It is because of them that, after 25 years as an academic, I know the people I do, and I can call on them if I need help for a

colleague, placement of a student, or advice for myself. Without the wide-ranging experiences that conference organization service has provided, and all of the people I have come to know and like as a result of those myriad experiences, my career would have been so much poorer and more narrowly focused than it has been and it would not have been half as fun! In fact, I would not be reminiscing in this article if not for these valuable experiences.

Discovering Your Tribe and Meeting Important People

Yet another advantage of conference participation, as alluded to earlier, is the chance to find your tribe. One's tribe in this context means those with whom you have things in common; those whose company and conversation you enjoy; those who are most like you.

Academia is filled with middle and high school bookworms, often picked on (maybe we're generalizing, as both of us were...), often favoring ideas and deep thought to people and frivolities. This is not to say we justicians/criminologists don't know how to have fun, just that our version of fun does not always fit that of the general population. Yes, we can "party"—our discipline after all is so attractive to students because they (and perhaps we) perceive it as the study of "sex, drugs and rock n roll!" AND let us not forget that conference hotels like us because some among us are prone to hang around the hotel bar an inordinate amount of time and spend money—but we also care about people and we care about ideas and we care about our world (we are a tribe of social scientists). We like talking to students and interacting with practitioners, triangulating our research methods and hierarchically modeling our data, after we propensity score match them (our data, not our students!).

Conferences in our discipline tend to attract people like us. They are people interested in the exciting/thrilling/fascinating side of humans and their behavior; they work in it or study it. They are the nerds or geeks of their high school class and they have come into their own in environments where interest in words and ideas and numbers is prized and even rewarded. Conferences provide the events and opportunities for criminal justice/criminology old and new tribal members to interact and possibly make a connection.

To the outside world, it may seem that our academic tribe is this homogeneous group, but we know that it is really an aggregation of at least three groups. The most important to me (Melanie) is my graduate school tribe, the friends and mentors who saw me through to who I am now. Together, we mostly go out to dinners, attend conference-related social events, and catch up at the conference hotel bar or in the conference center hallways; sometimes, we even venture out on sight-seeing outings. My graduate school tribe is most important because in many ways it is like the criminological family I was born into, it shaped a lot of my criminological and criminal justice knowledge and paradigm. I know that, because after I left, I was exposed to other paradigms, some of which made me uncomfortable, and others felt so natural,

they allowed me to evolve and develop as a scholar. Seeing my graduate school tribe is like attending a family reunion: the love is very strong, the relationships are deep and closely knit, but also very complex.

Then, there is my work tribe; and even though I see most of them most days of the week, there is something special about being away from our home department, something that makes colleagues into friends (or sometimes even spouses) as years pass. As we gather at school-related conference events, we strengthen our collegial bond and further mentor our students while encouraging positive cohort solidarity among them. And as my work tribe has changed over the years, conferences have allowed me to stay in touch with former colleagues, maintain ties, and solidify my professional network. It is next to the people in my work tribe that I develop new ideas, that I brainstorm new methodological approaches, that I mentor students, and prepare my conference presentations. They understand my specific set of circumstances because we share most of them, and because of that, they can be my informed advocates when the need arises, and celebrate my successes within their context.

Finally, there is my elected tribe, the group of professionals to whom I have, over time, found myself drawn. In my case, that group is a formal one, the International Sections both at ASC and ACJS, and it overlaps greatly with my other two tribes. This last tribe is not one I was “born” into, nor one that selected me (through the hiring process), but one that I elected to join. Strategic networking is involved in the development of this less organic tribe because it is this tribe that is the source of a lot of the intellectual stimulation I seek when I attend conferences. As a result, it is not a tribe characterized by fuzzy warm embraces (even though I am sure the ties will grow stronger as I get older), or Facebook messages, rather it involves email listservs and formal luncheons, but it is the tribe that I go to for inspiration and opportunities. It is also the tribe within which I anticipate my service to our professional organizations will stem, whether and when the time comes.

Some of those tribal members are likely to be important people. No we are not referring to those egoists in our academic field who obsess over their citation count, but we are referring to those people who become important to your career. We mean the types of folk we mentioned in the foregoing, who work with you on your research, provide you with suggestions on teaching, or give you ideas on how to study policies or practices in your area of the discipline. If you are interested in publishing books, some of those important people can be found at publisher’s booths in the book exhibit at conferences. Networking with the publishers, and the authors who hang around publisher’s booths, is a useful way to discover what book topics are in most demand and what might be the most fruitful approaches to take to publishing.

As mentioned earlier, being part of a tribe provides protection from the vagaries of the academic life. You not only are part of a group like yourself and gain from all of the warmth and comfort that it provides, but it insulates you from colleagues or institutions or a world that is less than supportive. Tribal members met at conferences or within departments provide collegial support

down the long career haul and once you meet them, you would do well to keep them. Ideally, when such connections are strong, you really can make friends forever, or at least until you retire!

Another Advantage

We would be remiss if we did not remark upon another advantage of regular conference attendance. We are talking about travel here. It is because of the regional, national, and international conferences that we were both able to travel the USA and the world. Sure, our departmental budgets have not always covered all of our travel, but they have covered most of it and that has made it possible for us to visit virtually every large city (cities that have large-enough conference hotels) in every region of the USA. Since becoming Executive Director of ACJS, I've (Mary) had the opportunity to travel to other countries (Canada, Great Britain, Australia/New Zealand, and in Fall 2015 Portugal) to attend international conferences. And as an international comparative criminologist, I (Melanie) have attended a few conferences abroad (in France and Switzerland), and while my departments often picked only a tiny part of the tab, any money is better than no money. These travels to other states and internationally have really opened our eyes to how other criminal justice systems operate, what researchers in other regions of the country or in other countries are grappling with, and how international scholars approach research in ways that may be different than in our state and country. Yes, traveling to conferences is an opportunity to see the sights (I, Melanie, just recently took my one-year old to Disneyworld when my academic husband and myself attended ACJS in Orlando in March 2015, and a bit before that, took her to Alcatraz when attending ASC in San Francisco in November 2014), but it is also an opportunity to conduct some intellectual exploration, and even sometimes make contacts for future field research endeavors. ACJS is particularly good for that, as criminal justice site visits are always organized, be they to a prison, a crime lab, or a coroner's office (I, Melanie, took advantage of the King County Medical Examiner's Office visit when ACJS was in Seattle in March 2007 because my research focuses on practices of medical examiners and coroners).

Recommendations and Conclusions for Building a Career via Academic (and Practitioner) Organizations

An academic life can be both incredibly intellectually thrilling and rewarding, and astoundingly stressful, stifling, and depleting. While we are often limited by outside forces in our ability to control which direction our academic lives take, it is usually within our power, albeit not always, to make our conference

experiences three- to five-day oases of intellectual fulfillment, social engagement, and even sometimes, the occasion to discover new horizons.

We have outlined how academic conferences in criminology and criminal justice can both serve you in your career and be an outlet for you to serve your discipline. Overall, it is important to remember that the main goal of conferences is intellectual enrichment, and that it can take several forms at conferences. Mostly, I (Melanie) find that it revolves mainly around picking out good panels to attend, not skipping keynote addresses if possible, coming well prepared for my own presentation, and proper networking, which involves seeking out those whose ideas I find interesting, instead of simply elbow-rubbing. Sometimes, it means volunteering for an early morning roundtable or skipping a panel to go to an awards banquet (or vice versa); but overall, it means being true to myself. This is how I make the connections that matter, glean the feedback I need, happen onto thought-provoking ideas, and make myself useful to my discipline in a meaningful and fulfilling way. As I have progressed throughout my career, I have learned that successful conferencing meant shifting the balance of obligations to fit the ever-moving emphases of an academic (and personal) life. Recently, this has meant spending more time mentoring students through the mentoring process. This does not end with their presentation, but it also involves inviting them to attend events I know will be of interest to them, and presenting them to people I think might be of help in the future, while letting them figure out their own way to navigate their conference experience and cultivate their own academic tribe.

In conclusion, while there is no recipe to craft the perfect, most-fulfilling, professionally helpful, intellectually engaging, and socially satisfying conference, mostly as each and every one of us is different, but also as conferencing, as an art, shifts throughout our conference-going lives, there are a few key ingredients to keep in mind:

- First and foremost: be there! That means be physically present, at the conference, at your panels, at others' panels, keynote addresses, awards banquets, and receptions. But it also means be intellectually present and engaged, prepared for your presentation(s), asking questions, seeking out interesting ideas and people.
- Second, and as a natural result of number one: volunteer, get involved with your section, maybe the program committee, maybe even become an officer. What better way to ensure your conference experience is fulfilling than to participate in shaping it for you and others?
- Third, and this goes a long way in accomplishing both number one and number two: build and cultivate your tribe. A tight-knit tribe of friends and colleagues will help you feel connected to the field, and will see you through the sadly inevitable ups and downs of an academic career. But remember to diversify, do not stay sheltered with only one group of friends who will never introduce you to new ideas; branch out, be adventurous, craft your academic family like you wish you could your own.

- Finally, have fun! Academia can be stressful, and overly stressed academics do not produce their best work or come up with their best ideas, so take advantage of conferences' built-in occasion to travel, discover new horizons, and maybe disconnect, even if it is only for a bit. Your overall career will benefit from it.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on Contributors

Melanie-Angela Neuilly is an assistant professor in the Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology at Washington State University. Prior to joining the department in 2011, Neuilly taught for five years at the University of Idaho. She received a PhD in Criminal Justice from Rutgers University in 2007, and a PhD in Psychology from the Université de Rennes in France in 2008. Neuilly conducts comparative research on violence and violent death. More specifically, she is interested in issues surrounding measurement and data collection processes, particularly as they pertain to medico-legal practices of classifying death. Neuilly's research has so far compared medico-legal practices in France and in the USA, in various sites, as well as at various times in history. After 15 years of conference going, both nationally and internationally, Neuilly is now experimenting with taking her toddler daughter along with her to conference.

Mary K Stohr is a professor in the Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology at Washington State University. She has published over 80 academic works of one sort or another, including 6 books and 50 journal articles, in the areas of correctional organizations and operation, correctional personnel, inmate needs and assessment, program evaluation, gender, and victimization. With her colleague, Craig Hemmens, she has developed Role, Ethics and Organizational Culture instruments for use in jail and prison settings. Her current projects (with colleagues and students) include research on the effect of social support on inmate infractions in prisons, organizational culture and ethics in prison and jail settings, the effect of solitary confinement on prison outcomes, marijuana law implementation in the states who have legalized it, and a number of statutory analyses of laws in the 50 states. She is the executive director of ACJS and has attended numerous national, regional, and international conferences in her 25 years as an academic.

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