Dress codes and the academic conference

McCulloch's Iron Laws of Conferences

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Despite being a staple of academic life (or perhaps because it is so taken-for-granted), the academic conference has been generally under-utilised as a site for academic research. Using participant observation as its methodology, this article draws on a long career of conference attendance to present two iron laws of conferences which address the relative smartness of dress of conference convenors and conference delegates. The social processes underpinning the sartorial phenomenon addressed by these laws are explicated. A third law is also introduced in a desperate attempt on the part of the author to secure the immortality sought by all who make their thoughts public by publishing them in academic journals.

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There is remarkably little research literature on academic conferences. In the same way as academics resisted the temptation to research their own practice for many years, they continue to resist the possibilities offered by that most ubiquitous academic activity, the conference. This relative neglect is surprising given that, as Chan (2013, p. 1060) notes: 'in the study of academic conferences, categorisations are often a consequence of a process of contestation and legitimation, negotiation and struggles of hierarchical power across and within academic disciplines'. This is not to say there is no literature or discussion of conferences. There are regular 'How to prepare for and get the most out of a conference' articles in the professional press. A compendium of these is provided in Houston (2013). Writers of fiction, most notably David Lodge, have elevated this most mundane of events to the highest point of drama (1984). Some have sought to look at the role of conference abstracts as promotional texts (Samar *et al.*, 2014) while investigators of the use of social media have begun to examine the academic conference as a site for research into Twitter, Tweets and associated alliterative activities (Wen *et al.*, 2015). Chan (2013) also points to aspects of the role of status in academic conferences and to the few articles that address this, for example, Räisänen (1999) and Blumen and Bar-Gal (2006).

The options available to academics wanting to examine under-researched aspects of conference social behaviour and the rules underpinning them remain to be fully exploited, but the volume of primary material out there must be huge if this single instance in a recent blog posting by an academic is typical (and there is no reason to suspect that it is not). In his blog, Lou Burnard (2010) reflects on his 36 years in the profession and details '10 chronologically-ordered small boxes containing detritus from assorted events and conferences I attended between 1977 and 2000'. While Burnard is only able to ruminate about 'how jolly interesting this collection of stuff might be to anyone interested in the last three decades of digital humanities', to scholars of the academic conference his 10 boxes would represent pay-dirt.

One of the roles of the social scientist is to observe the world and try to uncover the patterns and regularities

which underpin sometimes apparently random phenomena and occurrences. Many have sought to do this with varying degrees of success, including the founding fathers of sociology (Compte, Durkheim, Marx and Weber) and the generations of social scientists who followed them. While the search for knowledge and understanding is the major driver behind this search for knowledge, anecdotal evidence about the propensity of social scientists to google their own names on a regular basis and to establish email and text alerts which inform them whenever their work is cited suggests that another driver is a desire for recognition, and a search for disciplinary as well as spiritual immortality. This author readily confesses to these sins and to another, deeper desire which I have held secret since my days as an undergraduate in political science when I first came across the work of Robert Michels.

Michels is well-known to all political scientists, and also to many scholars in related fields as a man whose name will always be associated with a 'law'. In the same way as the natural and physical sciences have inter alia Boyle's Law, Faraday's Laws (he, lucky man has two laws named after him), Hooke's Law, and three laws named after the great Newton, political science has Michels' Iron Law of Oligarchy (Wikipedia, 2016). I offer the suggestion that few social scientists could deny having dreamed at some point in their careers of developing a law or similar phenomenon to be forever associated with their name. I for one, in a moment of auto-ethnographic honesty, am willing to admit that I have gone down that route and but have yet to complete my journey. Put bluntly, and to come to the focus of this article, 'McCulloch's Iron Law of (something/anything)' sounds good. In fact, it sounds better than good. It has a great ring to it and would fit well on a tombstone. 'Here lies the late Professor McCulloch' (those familiar with my ability to turn up on time for meetings will recognise the pun there) 'whose Iron Law survives him.' The sort of thing the grandchildren can stroll along to and look at on wet Sundays when they're at a loose end.

For the sake of any non-political scientists reading this piece, Michels' Iron Law of Oligarchy was published in 1911 and, as with all good laws, can be stated simply. It posits that, without the formal organisation of the mass of people democracy is impossible but that, once the people are formally organised, democracy is impossible because organised politics creates an elite. As Michels famously put it, 'Who says organisation says oligarchy', oligarchy being the rule of the few in their own interests. The desire to emulate Michels is strong and this short paper articulates both of McCulloch's Iron Laws of Conferences

(there, I've put it in print that there are, in fact, two of them) and their mode of development.

Method

For the benefit of those who might want to attempt to replicate this process of discovery, I should state that the laws were developed through a process of reflective introspection using a glass of the Barossa Valley's best Shiraz as the initial prompt object. Following my initial insight, I drew upon an academic lifetime's experience of attending conferences across the globe thereby increasing the chances that any conclusions drawn would be universal in nature. I also followed a well-established scientific method involving:

• observation
• the formulation of hypotheses
• gathering sufficient data to try to refute the hypotheses
• formulation of the laws, and
• soon being in a position to publish and sit back to accept both the accolades and the ensuing riches.

Data were gathered using a participant observation methodology and took in many places across the UK and also at conferences in Australia, continental Europe, the Middle East and the United States. The disciplinary areas represented in the sample included Doctoral Education, Higher Education, Political Science, Public Policy and Administration, Sustainable Development and Environmental Studies, and Voluntary Sector Studies. Participation and the associated observation were undertaken across a wide time-frame, the first conference attended being in 1980 and the most recent 2016. Both research method and sample size appear to be sufficiently robust to allow firm conclusions to be drawn.

McCulloch's Iron Laws of Conferences

The first of McCulloch's Laws of Conferences can now be stated.

> 'The academic conference convenor is always more smartly dressed than any of the other conference participants, even if the smartness of the conference convenor decreases with each day of the conference.'

This is an interesting phenomenon as there appears to be no obvious channel of communication between participants such that the convenor can know when he or she dresses in the morning what other delegates will be wearing. One suggestion that might be made is that the convenor would be able to judge from the delegates' breakfast attire what is the necessary degree of sartorial

elegance required in order for the convenor to remain 'ahead of the field', so to speak. This explanation does not stand up, however, when we observe that the law holds true irrespective of whether or not the convenor is staying at the conference hotel or, indeed, irrespective of whether or not there actually is a conference hotel. A second possible suggestion, suggested by an earlier anonymous reviewer who I must thank, is that 'the conference convenor has control over the delegate pool which enables him/her to operate as a sort of sartorial gatekeeper, perhaps punishing potential delegates who are known norm violators and rewarding those who typically fall into line.' It is with regret that this suggestion must be rejected as there is no evidence to suggest that the laws apply to a lesser degree in conferences where there is little competition to have a paper accepted than they do in more competitive conference situations.

The most convincing explanatory mechanism underpinning the first law is based in the acceptance by all involved of the differing status of 'convenor' and 'delegate' and an acceptance of the roles ascribed by these social constructs. The key social process here is the strength of the academic socialisation process which ensures that all attendees at academic conferences are aware of the need (a) for a convenor to 'dress up' and (b) for each delegate to 'dress down'. Observation has demonstrated that it is not uncommon, for example, for delegates to remove ties, scarves and jackets upon arriving at a conference in the morning in order to maintain the tacitly agreed upon social order. In this simple, but elegant way, sartorial order is maintained.

The second of McCulloch's Laws of Conferences is even simpler to state than the first.

'The closer the conference is located to the sea, the more casual the dress of all participants.'

This phenomenon seems to be the result of the impact of the broader cultural environment on all conference participants including the convenor, in that the sea is, apart from those relatively few and concentrated areas involving working ports in which conferences are seldom if ever held, almost universally associated with leisure of an informal kind. The second law holds true whether the sea in question is the northern or the southern hemisphere or whether it laps the shore in developed or developing, or rich or poor countries. This association of the seaside or beach with informal leisure permeates the ethos of conferences organised near salt water, operating on both convenor and delegates alike and, hence, explains the Second Iron Law.

The relationship between the two laws

Given that two laws have been developed which are held to apply to the same phenomenon, it is necessary to say something about precedence. Careful observation shows that, even though the Second Law of Conferences (that the dress of all conferences participants is more casual the closer to the seashore the conference is held), McCulloch's First Law of Conferences (that the convenor will always be more smartly dressed than all other delegates) takes precedence. This finding suggests that the first law (associated with academic culture and status allocations) is more powerful than the second (associated with the broader societal culture) and also allows us to contribute to resolving the perennial debate over the relative strength of these differing agents of socialisation and the associated social mechanisms.

Limitations of the study

Despite the author's claims to universality, a few areas remain to be explored, perhaps by research students keen to expand their networks. First, it is not clear whether there is a meteorological 'tipping point' at play here as there have been too few conferences held close to either the Arctic or the Antarctic Oceans to determine whether the law of 'casual dress' applies in extreme temperatures. Neither is it clear whether the clothing worn in Arctic or Antarctic settings lends itself to clear definition as either 'formal' or 'informal' attire thus raising potentially difficult conceptual issues. The author is currently formulating a research grant application to explore the possibilities suggested by this line of thought and to try to clarify further both the conceptual and sartorial issues involved.

Conclusion

This article points to the academic conference as a potential site for the investigation of some of the bigger questions in social science. It provides an exemplar for this by positing McCulloch's two Laws of Conferences which explain differences in the dress styles of delegates and convenors by reference to their relative social standings in the event being attended, while also taking account of the conference's geographical location and proximity to the sea. These laws have been established through the same mechanism that allowed Michels to establish his famous Iron Law of Oligarchy, that is, participant observation.

A Third Iron Law was, together with the earlier two, briefly outlined in the author's closing remarks to the

12th Quality in Postgraduate Research conference (www.qpr.edu.au) in April 2016. This Law may be stated as:

'No matter how many catastrophes the organisers think have occurred during the course of a conference, as long as the conference venue does not explode or self-combust, the delegates will assume that everything happened as it was planned.'

The lack of any dissenting voice either during or following those remarks offers further confirmation of the strength of the Iron Laws of Conferences. Further avenues of research have been suggested. It is hoped that the article will prove to be of use to those charged with organising academic conferences and is dedicated to all who take on this difficult task and to all those who attend and enjoy the fruits of their labours.

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