On the fragility of cultural markers within scholarly communities: physical distancing and the blurring of group referents

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1. INTRODUCTION

This analysis points to the fragility of scholarly communities as a result of the spread of physical distancing practices, which especially constrain the development of meaningful conversations and social relationships through a type of setting which conventionally has played a chief role in the enrolment and socialization of scholars, the in-person conference. In the last few decades, such conferences were often global conferences, allowing community members from different parts of the world to meet together, exchange ideas, and socialize. Yet the institutionalized rhythms of scholarly life, especially regarding international in-person conferences, have been profoundly destabilized as a result of the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. Our analysis develops a number of concerns that may ensue from the resulting spread of physical distancing practices – while highlighting the need for scholarly communities to experiment in trying to alleviate their potential impact.

More than two decades ago, Frost and Taylor (1996) published an edited book aiming to demystify and provide guidance to members (and future members) of the organizational analysis community on the "rhythms" of academic life. The aim was to describe "the experiences of scholars in different roles and at different transition points and [to provide] sets of guidelines that they felt might inform the choice of others" (Frost & Taylor, 1996, p. xiv). The authors' decision to rely on the *rhythm metaphor* to develop a broader viewpoint on the collection of essays compiled in the book is noteworthy. As implicitly shown through the organization of the table of contents, academic life is conceived of as a journey made up of *early rhythm* and *middle rhythm roles*. Early rhythm roles relate to activities such as "doing research and getting published," "working with doctoral students," and "getting tenure." Middle rhythm roles include elements such as "working together," "becoming

a reviewer," "becoming a full professor," and "working with policy makers."

Set within a cadenced choreography, academic journeys then presuppose a sense of recurrence and regularity unfolding in the backstage, like the stage sets of an opera, going up or down, in or out, as the minutely choreographed storyline unfolds on stage. In such a setting, what happens when an extraordinary event (e.g. a global health crisis) takes place and disrupts the rhythms of academic life?

Originally identified in China in December 2019, the COVID-19 rapidly spread to close to 200 countries. At the time of writing (May 26, 2020), approximately 5 million humans had officially contracted the virus, resulting in over 300,000 deaths (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). The resulting pandemic spawned drastic worldwide health prevention measures, among which the confinement and face-to-face distancing of humans became prominent. As part of the effort to constrain the pandemic, entire college and university campuses shut down and scientific gatherings were cancelled. Our analysis aims to reflect on some potential consequences that physical distancing practices may engender in the social sciences.

Readers interested in examining references will observe that our analysis relies on a fair number of books and edited books. Could it be that books offer more meaningful insight to make sense of social crises whose degree of turmoil and uncertainty is of a large magnitude? This is an important issue in need of further investigation. One critical stake is business academia's institutional tendency to favor the production of scholarly articles to the detriment of books, whose publication is seldom encouraged (Adler & Harzing, 2009).

2. THE MEANINGFUL ROLE OF IN-PERSON CONFERENCES IN ACADEMIA

Social sciences being the spaces in which both of us study realities and phenomena, the argument developed herein centers essentially on these spaces. Could it be that, in the longer run, physical distancing will weaken the *esprit de corps* in scholarly communities? Will physical distancing translate into growing difficulties for doctoral students and early-career faculty members to develop meaningful and supportive relationships in their scholarly community? Will physical distancing make it increasingly challenging for journal editors to identify promising authors and reviewers? How could meaningful academic journeys develop when the rhythms of academic life may be seriously destabilized as a result of face-to-face distancing measures?

Although the lack of hindsight from the current global health crisis impinges on the development of thoughtful responses to these questions, nonetheless, our analysis may be seen as a snapshot, taken a few months after the beginning of the "great lockdown" (Agence France-Presse [AFP], 2020), which brings to the fore some concerns regarding how scholarly communities may be impacted as a result of a health embargo on in-person encounters within the research domain.

By and large, knowledge production processes in many areas of the world, particularly since the 1980s, have developed in line with the pace of globalization.

It is commonly understood that, in the last decades, globalization has exerted significant influence over a wide range of human activities (Beck, 2000; Harvey, 2019) – including academia (King, Marginson, & Naidoo, 2011). Just think, for example, of long-distance flights, which play an indispensable role in bringing people from different countries to some conference site.

Echoing this perspective, and quite early in their academic journey, doctoral students tend to be socialized about the importance of face-to-face networking and the relevance of attending international conferences, where they have the opportunity to meet peers and established researchers from various parts of the world. Haggerty and Doyle (2015, pp. 79-80) maintain that, for graduate students,

> […] conferences are a valuable forum for networking. […] Networking amounts to meeting and sharing ideas and plans with people in your scholarly community. Even well-known scholars can enjoy meeting a junior colleague who has comparable interests and shares personal connections. […] An editor might need a contributor to a book or want someone to write a book review. If the two of you have met, you have a greater chance of being called upon. Such encounters also provide you with the enviable ability to write that e-mail that begins, "You may not remember me, but we met at the conference in Minnesota two years ago…" […] Conferences provide a good amount of the shared cultural repertoire of an academic community, and are a recurrent source of anecdotes and occasional moments of intrigue.

In sum, a conventional in-person scholarly conference is much more than exposing someone to a range of research papers and a number of panel sessions. Until early 2020, the notion of scholarly conference implied, for the most part, a physical conference taking place in a circumscribed geographic setting. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, this assumption no longer holds and numerous attempts emerge to "save" established scientific conferences through online and virtual protocols. The current global health crisis destabilizes scholarly communities' points of reference and cultural markers – with a range of virtual experiments taking place, along with marketing devices that seek to promote the benefits and sometimes even the "normality" of those virtual experiments (MacDonald, 2020).

Whereas there is no doubt that (in-person or virtual) conferences can be instrumental in facilitating (or constraining) the travel of ideas (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996), in-person conferences are permeated with symbols and rituals that play a significant role in socializing newcomers – exposing them, for instance, to the kind of public attitude, speech, and demeanor toward others that are constitutive of a "good" academic profile (Panozzo, 1997). Although this form of professional socializing may be limitative, profoundly conformist, and potentially stigmatizing for scholars who may not fit the "good" academic profile, nonetheless, it remains that a good part of socialization by emulation is attained via in-person scholarly conferences. Whether they are international or regional events, in-person conferences arguably are important for doctoral students and early-career scholars, because they offer spaces for much needed professional networking.

But in-person conferences are also important for middle or late-career scholars, as they provide renewed opportunities to sustain one's stature and to develop new research collaborations. Conventional conferences allow one to put a face on a given scholar's name. Face-to-face encounters with scholars from within or outside one's own scholarly network may influence an individual's scholarly life journey. Conventional room-based conferences allow participants to make impromptu encounters with others

– thereby pointing to the role of chance in knowledge development processes (Feyerabend, 1975).

Meeting an established author face-to-face may be of interest as a source of advice and, eventually, as a legitimate evaluator who may be solicited to write a letter of assessment regarding one's promotion case. New research projects may also emerge in hallway, informal conversations. When more experienced academics engage with middle-rhythm roles such as that of journal editor, face-to-face conferences then take on a new meaning, they act as opportunities to identify promising authors, interesting papers, and articulate presenters who seem to have the profile of meaningful reviewers.

Conventional conferences also constitute a break, a time to pause from the high speed professional lives of scholars, an oasis of time to just sit and listen, to be astounded by avant-garde ideas, while not having to simultaneously answer emails, respond to demands from one's Chair, or answer a student knocking on an office door. As perpetual students of the sciences, scholars tend to appreciate the downtime implied in travelling to a destination and attending a conference. Such physical disconnection from the daily realities of one's office space provides much needed suspension of one's day timer overload and, more essentially, it provides brain space to listen, to read and to think. This freed-up time may allow one to wander into sessions pertaining to new and exciting topics, or topics unrelated to one's current research projects.

In sum, face-to-face conferences play a significant role in learning and knowledge development processes, as well as academic journeys – as a result of the range of ramifications ensuing from being exposed to the conference-driven "shared cultural repertoire" of academic communities (Haggerty & Doyle, 2015, p. 80). This repertoire translates notably into ideas, cultural markers, social encounters, informal discussions, and so on. From this brief *exposé*, conventional room-based conferences are by no means trivial events; they constitute rich socialization, as well as cultural settings – while perhaps facilitating the emergence of collaborative research projects.

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3. CONSEQUENCES FROM THE SPREAD OF PHYSICAL DISTANCING PRACTICES

At this point, an interesting paradox emerges. While gatekeeping (especially through reviews and editorial decisions) clearly impinges on the production and dissemination of research (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2014; Gabriel, 2010), scholarly communities may have been subject to the illusion that ideas can travel unconstrainedly through face-to-face conference circles. The assumption is that one (presuming she/he has access to sufficient funding) is always able to attend international conferences in distant settings in order to present her/his work, network with others, and be exposed to new ideas, as well as others' most recent studies. Under the current health prevention measures, however, face-to-face conferences – and the extent of the positive ramifications they engender – are being constrained, as if the rhythms of academic life had been put on hold as a result of the "great lockdown."

An interview excerpt that Gendron conducted in 2003 with one of the founders of the behavioral accounting research movement came to mind. The context relates to the creation of the *Behavioral Accounting Newsletter* in the first half of the 1970s, which was then seen as a relevant way to develop linkages and bonds within the community.

> There was no, for lack of a better analogy, there was no speakers corner. There was no place you could go to knowing you would find people speaking about behavioral accounting research. [T]hat [was] a much bigger problem in the 1970s than it is in 2000 because we didn't have email; we had very slow national mail; it was slow and chancy. Air travel too was, relatively speaking, expensive. All the things that today speed up communication didn't exist. So it was really very difficult to have this kind of informal communication that would let you know what people were doing. So a [newsletter] served not only as a [newsletter] but it served as sort of a gathering place. Who are the like-minded people? Whose work should I be looking at? Who might I write letters to, phone call? All these kinds of things. [I]t gave us our own clubroom which we didn't have before. (Anonymous interviewee, research interview, May 2003)

Communicating with others was then a considerable challenge, and from today's viewpoint, it may be difficult for most of us to imagine what the rhythms of academic life were in the early 1970s. The "shared cultural repertoire" of academic life was then much different, particularly in terms of communication with distant others. This image from the past prompted us to formulate the following point: we may have to ponder on the possibility of having to reorganize a scholarly world where physical distancing becomes the norm.

The pandemic constitutes an invitation to contemplate to what extent the internet and online communication devices allow communities to counterbalance the effects that the deprivation of face-to-face encounters may generate, in the longer run. No matter how long physical distancing and the prohibition of large gatherings will actually endure, this contemplative endeavor is relevant, if only to better understand the role of face-to-face encounters and relationships in our academic journeys.

Drawing on neo-institutional language (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009), we currently experience the "disruption" of some of the key institutions that have surrounded, at least for a few decades, the world of scholarly research. Arguably, the consequences of this kind of disruption are manifold and significant – especially if physical distancing is enforced for a significant amount of time. For instance, Berger and Luckmann (1966) maintain that one's identification with a group is strengthened through regular contacts and relationships with significant others. According to them, the most effective device of reality-maintenance and group identification is face-to-face conversation. In other words, identification to a group may lessen as fewer meaningful face-to-face conversations occur between a scholar and other group members. The individual is then not reminded recurrently of several of the group's norms and values – thereby potentially weakening her/his commitment to those norms and values.

Such commitment is a big part of building and sustaining a community, i.e. an ideal, a space where cultural awareness, safeguarding, and revitalization occur (Martel, Brassard, & Jaccoud, 2011). Therefore, the current physical distancing requirements may translate, within academia, into weaker and more fragile communities, where scholars, especially early-career scholars, will have less opportunities to be socialized and informed of important symbols, norms, rituals, and shared reference points – while being less and less in contact with significant others in the community. This begs the issue whether online communications with a few significant others may be able to offset the variety of scholars to whom one is exposed, and with whom one may come into direct contact, in conventional room-based conferences.

For their part, established scholars may find it increasingly difficult to mobilize community members in undertaking mundane initiatives (e.g. acquiescing to a review request). It may not be far-fetched to envisage that safeguarding and revitalization of the "community" may be jeopardized as a result of physical distancing practices – if they endure for a long time. Thus, the possible institutionalization of physical distancing may strengthen

those social forces which, pre-pandemic, were already motivating individual scholars to develop a significant allegiance to their curriculum vitae (Burawoy, 2005), encouraging them to publish in journals that "count" the most and on a regular basis – while not being chiefly concerned of the extent to which their work is of interest to society (Humphrey & Gendron, 2015).

It can be anticipated that a number of readers will object to the negativity that surrounds the above conjectures, regarding the longer-term impact of physical distancing in social sciences communities. A number of conference organizers are currently experimenting with online devices, such as *Zoom* or *Skype*, in holding virtual conferences in a large array of disciplines, ranging from accounting to law and society and to justice and criminology. While virtual conferences may compensate, to some degree, for a number of the concerns enumerated above, their impact in sustaining a feeling of community through a web of genuine and meaningful conversations is, for now, an empirical question.

The growing interest for virtual conferences predates the COVID-19 pandemic. Their attractiveness was originally led by an environmental impetus, a concern about the carbon-emissions impact of scholarly conferences caused by air and land travel. At a more informal level, virtual conferences seem to attract a growing number of supporters for whom online and digital technologies herald the end of visa challenges, bad weather, delayed or red-eye flights. While physically staying closer to home, supporters can enjoy livestreamed presentations in the comfort of their living room or via in-person "hubs" set up across continents. Virtual format conferences are also said to ensure better conversation between scholars with access to funding to cover expensive travel costs and those with fewer resources or having family caregiving responsibilities.

That being said, for the time being, one should remain skeptical of outbursts of enthusiasm regarding the "successes" and "achievements" of virtual conferences. For instance, emerging concerns relating to online visual communications indicate that visualizers may experience fatigue as a result of dissonance between the image of their interlocutor on screen and the lack of physical proximity (Hickman, 2020).

4. FINAL REMARKS

In conclusion, ethnomethodologists believe that much can be learned on social processes when conventional behavior is altered and interrupted (Garfinkel, 1967). Since March 2020, most of us have experienced confinement and physical distancing. Academia is not immune from COVID-19 and the effects ensuing from physical distancing practices. The institutionalized rhythms of academic life, which were echoing the spread of globalization, are being destabilized as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The ideal of an inalterable globalization and its optimistic agenda to foster the development of internationally dispersed but closely bounded scholarly communities, may be under threat. Our analysis brought to the fore a number of consequences that the deprivation of in-person conferences may engender, in the longer run, in scholarly communities. Assuming that physical distancing endures for a while, it may be expected that the depletion in possibilities and opportunities from face-to-face encounters will translate into communities being weakened in important respects, for instance, regarding group identification, member mobilization, commitment to norms and values – while possibly fostering a sense of individualization (Willmott, 2011). It is imperative that scholarly communities reflect on how physical distancing may impact them and how a sense of community might be fostered, even in the presence of others' absence. This issue is relevant even if physical distancing rules do not last very long – given the enduring concern with the carbon footprint that face-to-face conferences engender.

In this respect, the concept of *reticular conference* might help to overcome some physical distancing consequences. This kind of conference may be conceived of as a central location connected to several geographically distant "hubs" – where each hub involves a number of scholars from a given region or geographic area interacting face-to-face together (respecting the two-meter rule), while being connected, from time to time, with plenaries and panels taking place at the central location. It is imperative to think of different ways of experiencing in-person connectivity in the context of scholarly conferences, given the turmoil ensuing from the current health crisis – as well as the range of uncertainty and concerns related to global warming. While a number of biomedical scientists are currently experimenting to develop medication and vaccine against COVID-19, social scientists need to experiment to protect the sanctity of in-person relationships in our communities.

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