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How to network effectively?

Challenges and solutions for junior researchers at academic conferences

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Abstract

I examine how junior researchers view the challenges of networking at academic conferences, and compare their views of these challenges to those of senior researchers. Networking at conferences may be important because they may affect junior researchers' career progression. In this regard, it is relevant to explore the challenges which junior researchers feel they face when trying to network at conferences. I also review the extent to which senior researchers sympathise with the plight of junior researchers. And if so, do they propose solutions which are similar to those suggested by junior researchers? Based on structured interviews with junior and senior researchers at the Faculty of Social Sciences in the University of Helsinki, I find that senior researchers sympathised with the challenges faced by junior researchers. However, junior and senior researchers generally diverged in their suggested solutions to these challenges. Junior researchers preferred solutions which address the structural problems limiting their networking, whereas senior researchers highlighted more practical solutions to these challenges. Future studies could explore if such views are found in other disciplines and universities.

Practical tips

- To meet your peers, choose smaller workshops and conferences.
- Try to tag along as part of a project group or with supervisors to major conferences.
- Try forming your own panel for major conferences.
- Set up a meeting with people you want to meet before hand
- Send these people a copy of your work and show how your work fits their interest to boost the likelihood of a meeting
- Do not just aim for the big stars and big panels. Go for the small ones as well and find out what is going on there.
- Do not feel disillusioned if you find yourself to be lonely during major conferences.
- Unease, anxiety, and disillusionment are shared by many other researchers, not just you.
- Conferences are not just about work, it's also an opportunity to explore the place. Enjoy.
- Be yourself. It's hard enough to break the ice when starting a conversation. Don't make it even harder. Enjoy the conversation rather than have it for pure instrumental purposes.

Introduction

How should junior researchers network effectively at conferences? Networking has become especially important in most industries, academia not withstanding (van den Brink and Benschop, 2014). This concern is relevant as junior researchers may encounter substantial struggles during networking at conferences. Junior scholars usually do not yet have a glittering research resumé. Some may have also attended conferences individually rather than as a part of existing social networks or groups. In both instances, they may be filled with self-doubt about whether other researchers would be keen to have a conversation with them. They may thus shrink away from engaging with other researchers at conferences. At worst, they may even feel excluded and have diminished self-esteem. For junior researchers, such travails are compounded by the fact that they do not have many conference opportunities for networking. Junior researchers tend to have limited financial means which restricts the number of conferences that they may attend. They may thus feel greater pressure to make this “one conference opportunity” count (see Goel and Grimpe, 2013). In general, conferences generate a huge amount of pressure for researchers. However, junior researchers may face pressures which vary significantly from those of senior researchers.

I thus explore challenges which junior researchers face when networking at academic conferences, and their potential solutions. I explore these challenges and solutions based on interviews with seven researchers at different stages of their academic career. All seven researchers are affiliated to the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Helsinki. Through these interviews, I am able to shed some light on how junior and senior researchers view the challenges which the former faces when networking at conferences. Although junior researchers seemed divided on the importance of conferences, they recognise that networking may be crucial for their careers. Unlike senior researchers however, junior researchers frequently highlight difficulties in navigating networking. I thus hope to complement existing web resources which provide solutions and advice for academic networking by juxtaposing the views of senior and junior researchers.

Is networking at conferences important?

Prior to exploring the challenges and solutions to effective networking at academic conferences, it is perhaps worth asking: should one view conferences as a platform for networking? According to Yammine (2018), active networking at these events may engender meaningful connections and job prospects. Torbet (2018) adds that networking provides an opportunity to discuss one’s work with other researchers (see also Hudson, 2007). Successful networking may also yield further invitations to other smaller or “by-invitation-only” conferences and even boost publications odds in journals (Faria and Goel, 2010) In doing so, one may get to know other researchers, especially senior

researchers, who may help with job hunting. Van den Brink and Benschop (2014) stressed this point when they demonstrated that career advancement in academia is related to networking with “gatekeepers”. For instance, the authors defined elite academics as gatekeepers because they grant access to “influential and desirable positions of full professors” (p. 462). Gatekeeping occurs in multiple phases of the appointment process: “decisions about which candidates are shortlisted, interviewed, and nominated” (p. 464). The authors also stressed that gatekeepers tend to prefer candidates which are similar to them. Gatekeepers also tend not to cast their nets far during the hiring process. Rather, they tend to actively seek out candidates within their network and ask for recommendations on candidates from the same network (p. 471).

From this perspective, it seems clear why networking at conferences may be important for junior researchers who are keen to advance their careers. Generally speaking, senior researchers tend to be at major international conferences of their disciplines. Conferences may thus be one instance during which junior researchers may be able to network face-to-face with senior researchers. It may occur when senior researchers are in the audience during one’s presentation, or as follow-up conversations with such researchers after such presentations, or even as conversations during coffee breaks. Conferences may hence potentially offer visibility to other researchers, some of whom may potentially be gatekeepers.

Despite the potential importance of networking at conferences, junior researchers do encounter difficulties in networking. Some of these difficulties include feeling uncomfortable with networking (Torbet, 2018), feeling awkward with starting conversations (Yammine, 2018), feeling low self-esteem as a junior researcher vis-à-vis senior researchers, or feeling stressed with having conversations in big groups of people. Although individual junior researchers may feel that such anxieties are unique to themselves, it seems clear that these sentiments are shared by many other junior researchers (Drayton, 2019). Nevertheless, having such anxieties may impede these junior researchers’ networking at academic conferences. If networking at academic conferences are really important, then such anxieties may affect their career progression.

To this end, I explore how junior and senior researchers view the challenges of academic networking in conferences. I also assess if they senior researchers share similar views on the challenges which junior researchers face. I then review the various solutions which junior and senior researchers suggest to overcome these challenges.

Data and method

My data is based on interviews conducted through email with seven participants from the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Helsinki. Interviewees were recruited from my social network.

The seven interviewees varied in their experience and seniority within academia, age, and gender. Two of the interviewees are currently doing their PhDs, two other interviewees are postdocs, one of the interviewees is a senior lecturer, another is an adjunct professor, and another is a professor. Five interviewees are female, and two interviewees are male. All interviewees are aged between twenty-five and sixty. All interviewees are referred by pseudonyms in this text to anonymise them.

The interviews were conducted in a structured manner. All interviewees received the same questionnaire consisting of seven questions. The first seven questions were specific questions. They asked interviewees on what they thought about the importance of networking at academic conferences, challenges which they had faced when networking at conferences, solutions to the challenges which they had described, challenges which they think that junior researchers face when networking at conferences, their proposed solutions, their experience at networking at conferences, and the types of conferences which they have attended. The last question is an open-ended question which asked interviewees for any further thoughts or responses on the subject.

Findings

I present the findings in a thematic manner in the following order: importance of networking during conferences, challenges to networking during conferences, and their corresponding solutions.

Importance of networking during conferences

Almost all interviewees felt that networking at conferences were important. They noted that networking during conferences may enable researchers to meet new colleagues, find out about the state of the art in their field of research, and open avenues for potential collaborations and contacts. However, it is clear that senior researchers (lecturers and professors) expressed greater merits from networking at conferences in more concrete terms than junior researchers (PhDs and postdocs). They generally emphasised the merits of knowing more about the state-of-the-art and getting to know colleagues. For instance two senior researchers suggested,

Margaret, adjunct professor: Very important, it's an essential way to build new collaboration possibilities and share information but also to spend social time together.

Lilian, senior lecturer: Super. Can't beat it. Much of my networking for the past 20 years are from conferences. They get to know you and you get to know them.

By contrast, junior researchers generally presented the benefits from networking in more abstract and potential terms. They also simultaneously and readily expressed doubts about such benefits. They were also more circumspect about the challenges and hurdles which they might need to overcome to achieve those benefits.

George, postdoc researcher: In my opinion, networking hardly improves our research skills (i.e., methodology, writing, research ideas), nevertheless it is crucial for success.

David, PhD researcher: I am not sure if networking in conferences help one's career. According to my experience, meetings in conferences were pretty superficial and perfunctory particularly for junior researchers.

Meghan, PhD researcher: I believe networking is very important in academia, as it can give a boost to one's career, both in recognisability, citations and being perceived as an expert in a question, country, and the like.

Senior researchers thus appeared more aware of the specific benefits which may accrue from networking during conferences. This is perhaps why they were able to present the benefits in more concrete terms. They were also generally more upbeat about these benefits. By contrast, junior researchers seemed to be present these benefits more abstractly. And even if they do view it concretely, they were quick to qualify those benefits.

Challenges of networking during conferences

Senior and junior scholars seemed to view different challenges pertaining to networking during conferences. In this interview sample, senior scholars seemed to highlight different personal challenges that they had faced. For instance, Sandra referred to the quality of papers and presentations whereas Margaret focused on the networking habits of Finnish researchers. Furthermore, Lilian took note of how the movement of people during big conferences impeded networking.

Sandra, professor: Sometimes the papers are disappointing, not really high quality or topical for my purposes. Also, in big conferences the programmes are daunting, so you need to focus and find the issues and people you like to meet.

Margaret, adjunct professor: In the beginning, it was quite difficult to get to know anyone as the Finns don't have the culture to use their own networks to introduce younger scholars to their peers.

Lilian, senior lecturer: Also, big conferences may be tricky as people hover all over the place and you might never catch a gang.

In sharp contrast, junior scholars' responses seemed to suggest that they face similar challenges when networking. They generally raised attention to two obstacles. Firstly, they pointed out that not belonging to any research network may make navigating the networks within a conference daunting. They thus found it difficult to network effectively at conferences. Secondly, they highlighted that some senior researchers seemed to care little about the work of junior researchers. They might thus

find it difficult to find opportunities to network effectively with senior researchers, even if senior researchers are potentially important for their career progression.

George, postdoc researcher: It is hard to reach prestigious scholars whose schedule at a conference is super-busy. This applies especially to general conferences.

David, PhD researcher: Senior researchers and professors are little interested in young researchers.

Rachel, postdoc researcher: If you do not have a clear group where you belong to, it is difficult to get any 'use' from the conference. In a worst-case-scenario you have your paper accepted to a panel where no one really is from the same field and thus, there is no networking within the panel either.

Meghan, PhD researcher: As an early career researcher, it has been more challenging to navigate oneself at academic conferences, as the lack of experience and confidence in the field is not at the same par as the people's one would like to network with. In addition, the overall lack of contacts in the beginning makes it harder to expand your network through common acquaintances, etc... Once you go to conferences, you go, present the paper, thank for the comments (if you actually got any) and leave. This is very sad and not purposeful. However, if you are with senior colleagues or have a research group around you, the networking is on a completely different level.

However, senior scholars did seem to sympathise with the challenges indicated by junior scholars. They appeared to recognise that not being embedded within existing networks and not knowing other senior researchers impede networking and fulfilment at academic conferences. Furthermore, Sandra also seemed to be keenly aware that junior researchers may feel troubled when approaching senior researchers due to differences in their status.

Sandra, professor: They have the junior status so it is hard to approach a professor. They also might not know very many participants and feel alienated... Big conferences can be daunting if you don't know people there, so don't be discouraged if end up feeling lonely among the crowd.

Margaret, adjunct professor: Difficulty in having contacts with senior scholars that increases the propensity to hang around with peers. While that is certainly understandable, it's not necessarily the best way to make most out of the situation [conference].

Lilian, senior lecturer: Getting to know someone to hang out with.

Junior researchers however also reflected that the lack of resources, particularly funding to participate in numerous conferences, may limit their networking opportunities. This point was however not

directly raised by senior researchers when they reflected on the challenges which junior researchers face during networking at conferences. One junior researcher however qualified that the challenge of funding may reflect less about the lack of funding, but speak more about a lack of knowledge about different funding sources which may be available to junior scholars.

Meghan, PhD researcher: From a junior researcher perspective, I have noticed that especially in Finland there is a problem with funding of travel. Some PhD candidates might have funding and be working full time on their dissertations, which enables them more easily to travel to conferences and be active. Additionally, some might have more funding for travelling through their grants and contracts. Even though there are possibilities to apply for funding more generally, not everyone is knowledgeable about it.

George, postdoc researcher: [Senior] academic[s] travelling to conferences want to have some enjoyable time too. However, as a junior scholar, it is unlikely that you stay at the same hotel, have a meal at the same restaurant, or grab a drink at the same bar, simply because your situation requires you to be on the budget.

Senior researchers did not directly address this challenge of having inadequate resources. However, one senior researcher reflected that the lack of budget for participating in conferences did hamper her ability to network during her time as a junior researcher. She hence proposed that junior scholars use their limited travel funds wisely by participating primarily in conferences where they may maximise their output: feedback, networking etc. This suggestion was also echoed by another senior researcher who highlighted that junior researchers could leverage on their supervisors or their own research networks to propose workshops or panels. When junior researchers build on their research network, they may expand their research networks in the process.

Lilian, senior lecturer: There are some postdoc years I didn't have the funds to conference and this generated a gap... Prioritise workshops, or conferences that have a workshop structure, such as joined sessions of the ECPR, NoPSA conference. You get to know the people better.

Sandra, professor: I like to look around for smaller conferences which focus on particular issues that I am interested in. Of course, often the smaller ones are by invitation. So stay in touch with your professors and even suggest a workshop yourself if you have a theme you would like to propose and be active in the organizing of the occasion.

Solutions to challenges of networking at academic conferences

The solutions offered by the different interviewees appeared to vary according to their seniority and experience. Junior researchers seemed to focus on solutions addressing the structure of academic conferences, and even academia. One junior researcher suggested that conference sessions should be more relaxed to induce participants away from replicating a hierarchical environment where seniority and experience matters.

Meghan, PhD researcher: a more practical solution would be to organise workshops or more relaxed sessions within the conference, where more senior and junior scholars could interact.

Another junior researcher suggested that more funding for more academic conferences, and perhaps for networking activities during conferences, could help junior researchers network better. These two solutions effectively focus on “levelling the playing field” between junior and senior researchers as a way of addressing networking challenges faced by junior researchers.

David, PhD researcher: Travel grant[s] to improve junior researchers’ interactions?

Two junior researchers also highlighted the need to induce collaboration with senior researchers for greater visibility and networking chances at academic conferences. These could come in the form of funding to support junior researchers’ collaboration with senior researchers (see on related subject Medoff, 2003), and a strengthened supervisor-supervisee relationship in which a supervisor may help supervisees locate potential collaborators and embed them within research networks.

Rachel, postdoc researcher: It is difficult to have your paper accepted in the ‘cool panels’ without some big name as a co-author... Again, the role of the supervisor is crucial here.

By contrast, two out of three senior researchers seem to offer solutions which do not directly address the feelings of status disparity or unease of approaching senior scholars. One senior researcher suggested that junior researchers would be able to network effectively if they did not network or engage in conversation for instrumental reasons. She also noted that repeated participation in similar conferences may increase the likelihood that one will find a network to belong to. Another senior researchers highlights that alternative venues where junior researchers may meet their peers may be more effective networking sites than big conferences.

Lilian, senior lecturer: Do not be instrumental about it. Make friends and avoid fandom and power quests. If someone likes you try to hang out with them, whatever their academic status. You’d be surprised how things will develop in the long run... Attend same specific conferences regularly, so you keep meeting the same people.

Sandra, professor: As a junior scholar, go to winter/summer schools and smaller conferences/workshops to get to know other junior scholars. Be active in discussions.

One of the senior researchers, however, proposed solutions which may directly address one of the main challenges listed by junior researchers: not being embedded within existing research networks or not being linked to other senior researchers within the network. She suggested that senior researchers could consider organising mentoring programmes and conducting conference participation in groups so that junior researchers do not feel left out.

Margaret, adjunct professor: Mentoring programs organized by the conference and participating the conference as a team from one institution, including senior and junior scholars, instead of leaving PhD students and young post docs to navigate by themselves.

There may however be one common ground between senior and junior researchers, specifically in terms of overcoming one of the challenges of junior researchers face when networking with senior researchers. This common ground pertains to arranging for private meetings during the conference. If junior researchers seek to meet senior researchers, they may arrange for a meeting beforehand. George, for instance, suggested that junior researchers circulate a copy of their work to increase the likelihood of a productive meeting. In a similar vein, Sandra, postulated that junior researchers ought to be aware that when senior researchers agree to meet, they are taking time out of their own schedule. Junior researchers should thus maximise such meetings, when they have the opportunity to do so.

George, postdoc researcher: If academic you want to talk to is high rank, it is advisable to send them an email before the conference with a brief outline of your interest in the person. Send them your CV/webpage, one-pager of your project you want to discuss, and schedule a meeting...Be aware of the person's work – it will improve the chances that you will successfully trigger the other person's interest.

Sandra, professor: remember to be professional and respect others' time

Discussion and conclusion

In short, most interviewees seemed to recognise that conferences offer some value to their careers in academia. Consequently, they viewed networking as a part of the job. However, senior and junior researchers appeared to face different types of networking challenges owing to their different experiences and statuses within academia. Nevertheless, senior researchers seemed to be aware of some of the challenges which junior researchers faced, and sympathised with them. Yet, such sympathies might not translate to solutions which directly address the challenges which junior researchers faced, especially challenges which junior researchers felt to be structural. Senior

researchers did however provide some concrete and practical steps which junior researchers might take to overcome some of the networking challenges which they faced.

At a more general level, it is perhaps worth investigating if senior researchers sympathise with the plight of junior researchers to a similar degree in other universities and disciplines. For instance, in universities where hierarchies are stricter, senior researchers may perhaps have less sympathy for the challenges which junior researchers face. By contrast, junior researchers may face less networking challenges in the natural sciences where group work and collaboration with senior researchers is far more common. In this regard, future work could juxtapose the findings here to other contexts.

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Appendix table A1. Profile of interviewees

Pseudonym	Position	Gender	Age
Sandra	Professor	Female	45-60
Margaret	Adjunct professor	Female	35-45
Linda	Senior lecturer	Female	35-45
George	Postdoc researcher	Male	25-35
Rachel	Postdoc researcher	Female	35-45
David	PhD researcher	Male	35-45
Meghan	PhD researcher	Female	25-35

** Note: consent was obtained from interviewees for data collection for the purposes of this research.*

Appendix table A2. List of questions

1) How important is networking in academic conferences for one's career in academia? If so, to what end?
2) What challenges have you faced during networking at academic conferences?
3) What solutions would you recommend to overcome the challenges you described in question (2)?
4) What challenges do you think junior scholars face during networking at academic conferences?
5) What solutions would you recommend to overcome the challenges you have described in question (4)?
6) How experienced would you say you are at networking at academic conferences?
7) What types of academic conferences have you attended (International, local, discipline-specific etc.)? Are there any specificities that junior researchers should look out for when networking at these different types of conferences?
8) Would you have any further comments which you would like to add to this theme of discussion?