Article title: A Collaborative Autoethnography of Organising the First Online Conference for Southern African Students of Psychology

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A Collaborative Autoethnography of Organising the First Online Conference for Southern African Students of Psychology

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic necessitated the accelerated adoption of online technologies for teaching and learning globally, including academic conferencing. This was a challenging, yet welcomed, learning experience for the academic organisers of the 7th Southern African Students’ Psychology Conference that was held virtually for the first time in 2021. Using collaborative autoethnography, we articulate our personal experiences of organising the conference in our various capacities. We do so within the context of the nationwide lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic and at an open distance e-learning tertiary institution in a state of flux. Isolation, the impostor syndrome and burnout thematically unified our collective experiences, reminding us that we are academics in context. We respond to gaps in the literature by prioritising the experiences of female academics in the Global South and academics at an open distance e-learning university within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa.

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Introduction

The Southern African Students’ Psychology Conference (SASPC) is held biennially and provides psychology students across sub-Saharan Africa with the opportunity to present their postgraduate research to peers and faculty members. Past conferences were hosted face-to-face by the University of South Africa in collaboration with other partnering universities. However, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020 necessitated major transformations in many sectors, including higher education (HE). Mandated social distancing measures essentially forced rapid changes from the traditional method of face-to-face learning towards open distance e-learning (ODeL) to
maintain student and staff access to academic programmes. The SASPC conference organising team was therefore forced to move the student conference online.

As the organisers of the SASPC, we became acutely aware of the challenges and positive opportunities that moving the conference online presented (Raby and Madden 2021). However, it was during our pre- and post-conference verbal and electronic conversations that we realised that our collaborative experiences of the conference were deeply embedded in our experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic and the institutional challenges. Collaborative autoethnography (CAE) provided an invaluable research method through which we could make sense of our own social reality (Roy and Uekusa 2020) as organisers, academics, women and survivors of a pandemic. Three dominant themes, namely, isolation, the imposter syndrome and burnout emerged from our analysis.

Method

CAE is a derivative of autoethnography. It involves two or more collaborators working together to consolidate their unifying or divergent experiences of a particular sociocultural phenomenon of interest (Hernandez, Chang, and Ngunjiri 2017). It mitigates against the criticism of univocal narratives since there was a triad of experiences that were drawn upon enhancing “relational authenticity” (Hernandez, Chang, and Ngunjiri 2017, 253) in this CAE process. We followed a partial collaborative framework (Chang 2016) working with each other at varied levels of engagement from the start of the student conference, in email and Microsoft Teams conversations, in data analysis and during the collaborative writing process. A partial collaborative approach of varying levels of engagement became essential to our collaboration since we each had very different academic responsibilities, personal circumstances and leave schedules.

Isolation

Isolation, specifically social isolation, is a complex and multidimensional construct that relates to the quality and frequency of a person’s interactions with another individual, group or larger social structure (Clair et al. 2021). Before the pandemic, academic socialisation had been an intentional endeavour by the SASPC organisers, an important consideration within the context of our distance education institution, where students traditionally have very little social interaction with other students compared to in-person universities and can therefore often feel isolated (Fidalgo et al. 2020; Mbukusa 2017). The conference was therefore intended to alleviate the isolation that many distance education students experience, and within the context of the pandemic, the lessening of this isolation became of even more importance for the 7th SASPC.
The Covid-19 pandemic had forced us into an uncertain new reality and complete isolation from our peers and the familiar spaces that we occupied. Even though we were an ODeL institution, the migration to fully online operations and working remotely had been accelerated by the pandemic. The team’s acceptance of the conference migration to a completely online platform and South African low-down measures meant that we would need to organise a conference in isolation from each other. Our organising committee meetings were conducted over Microsoft Teams meetings, but socio-economic and technical challenges with bandwidth led to meetings that were “cameras off”, eliminating the opportunity to interpret each other’s non-verbal cues and acting as a barrier to effective communication.

As a new staff member at the time, I relied on other colleagues for support and guidance. These colleagues were easily accessible in their offices prior to the Covid-19 restrictions. But with working remotely came isolation. Calling a colleague over MS Teams seemed too formal and created some barrier to open communication. I also did not want to inundate colleagues with questions via email, so I resorted to trying to figure things out on my own. (Itumeleng)

Although certain reports, predominantly from the Global North, suggest that academics have more time to dedicate to these activities while working from home (Aczel et al. 2021; Bak-Coleman and Bergstrom 2022; Fleming 2020), the pandemic has not affected everyone equally. For example, female staff members, staff members with comorbidities and administrative and service personnel at universities were two times more at risk of psychological distress (Van Niekerk and Van Gent 2021). This finding was most concerning as the majority of the 7th SASPC organising team consisted of female academics who were still in the emerging phase of their careers as academics. It seemed that we, like our local and international counterparts, had to juggle a lot more than conference organising and work responsibilities:

I was so overwhelmed at home, never mind at work! No more help at home and meals to cook, clothes to wash and iron, floors to sweep and mop . . . I felt I had to put on a brave face for my family. However, when my brother, who is single and lives alone, expressed his wish to stay with my husband and I in our home for the lockdown, I broke down . . . I had to be honest and tell him that I just didn’t feel strong enough, I actually wasn’t handling this well . . . I had to ask him to rather stay with our parents . . . I felt so guilty that I could not take care of my younger brother. Instead, here I was, working hard to support the students conference . . . (Bianca)

The full extent of the toll of isolation from each other as a conference team was compounded by the personal isolation that we felt from our loved ones. This isolation was always hedged by the threat of death or prolonged illness due to Covid-19. Two of the authors from this paper buried loved ones on the last day of the conference signifying the magnitude of loss that confronted us and other organisers and participants of the conference as we tried to maintain a sense of normality and continuity throughout the conference. We were all trying to provide our students with a context of normality, yet
we were in turmoil trying to manage feelings of helplessness in our isolated states or, indeed, our own grief:

It felt surreal . . . here I was facilitating the final day of the conference using my laptop, while logging into my aunt and uncle’s joint funeral on my phone. They formed part of our family’s inner circle growing-up, and here I was, 700 kms away from home and family, unable to say goodbye because of Covid-19 restrictions combined with work responsibility. I felt completely irreverent, isolated, and alone, as I sat in my study and dissociatively switched between my uncontrollable crying and conference facade. (Janice)

Both the perceived and actual social isolation experienced by the SASPC team and our colleagues worldwide during the Covid-19 pandemic pose significant psychological consequences. The upheaval of our daily lives and routines, coupled with feelings of loneliness, hopelessness and grief over the death of loved ones, has the potential to affect our mental health and is compounded by the effects of prolonged social isolation (Pietrabissa and Simpson 2020). Conversations with our students during the conference highlighted the impact of Covid-19 isolation on them. They were grateful for the platform but wanted more interaction, more opportunity to share their experiences.

The Imposter Syndrome

As academics at the ODeL institutions, we were overwhelmed by the constant state of flux that the institution was in owing to the need to migrate fully online because of the pandemic. We had moved from having relative academic flexibility to spending inordinate amounts of time on tuition matters. As a result, we felt anxious and incompetent in our individual roles. We lacked training in this fully online space, but we were eager to learn and develop our skills. We googled and asked questions, and then googled some more. We felt like imposters to say the least. The online space left incompetency exposed. There was nowhere to hide. There were many conversations that we had where the implicit understanding was that we were going to be exposed as incompetent if we did not have an audience for the conference. We joked that we were experiencing imposter syndrome, but it was a very real paralysing fear for us.

The imposter phenomenon was initially coined by Clance and Imes (1978) in a study on high achieving women. The imposter syndrome refers to the psychological phenomenon characterised by a sense of intellectual fraudulence and an inability to internalise success and competency (Clance and Imes 1978; Clark et al. 2021). Some of the features of imposter beliefs that were identified with include fear and doubt, introversion, dread of evaluation, fear of failure and anxiety.

I guess that I have always known the limits of my knowledge, competencies, and skills. But those gaps could be managed in everyday face-to-face interactions . . . I felt vulnerable in the online space. (Janice)
Literature on the imposter syndrome in different professions within academia often refers to novices and focuses on early career academics (Bothello and Roulet 2019; Wilkinson 2020). However, these perspectives provide a narrow understanding of the imposter phenomenon in academia and do not consider “academic career categories and hierarchies” (Taylor and Breeze 2020, 2). We align ourselves with the concept of imposter positionality, defined as “a claimed outsider-on-the-inside academic location” (Taylor and Breeze 2020, 2) and consider the intersectionality of our experiences as female academics. We were positioned as female academics and with regard to race we identify as black, white, and Indian. With regard to career categories or hierarchies we were positioned as one senior lecturer, one postdoctoral researcher, and one new lecturer. These identities and positions came with various imposter ideations.

My previous work with online spaces and digital skills spoke directly to my competencies as a Postdoctoral Fellow . . . I mean, that was why I was hired for the job! But with the conference, the stakes just felt higher . . . the students were relying on us . . . I had to do a good job. (Bianca)

When the pandemic thrust us into isolation, it had only been three months since I joined the university as a lecturer. I was still figuring out where I fit into the department and how I could better position myself. I was then trusted with chairing the scientific committee, a position I felt unqualified for. Throughout the process, I kept thinking ‘you don’t know what you are doing’. As a black female I am also burdened by the responsibility to represent and prove that I am competent and belong in this space. (Itumeleng)

Although the relationship between gender and impostorism is generally unclear (Clark et al. 2021), issues of gender disparity and intersectionality in academia are crucial to understanding imposter syndrome in the academy (Taylor and Breeze 2020). We are firstly positioned as female academics, and secondly as being at different stages of our academic careers. These two positions mated with the university’s migration to fully online studies, and resulted in self-doubt and internal pressure to perform. Organising academic conferences contributes to performance evaluations in the university. However, this was a motivating factor juxtaposed with a fear of failure.

As Augustus (2021) pointed out, the accelerated changes in work practices resulted in increased volume of work, which for us in an ODeL institution meant a move from blended learning to fully online studies. We therefore required training to learn the new technologies needed for online teaching, including the conference. Our experiences were consistent with components of the imposter cycle, where “sufferers” experience doubt and fear about a project and either overwork or overprepare (Clance and O’Toole 1987; Clark et al. 2021). Although the university promotes the female scholars through various support mechanisms, the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic posed challenges for female academics. Studies exploring the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on women working in HE have indicated that women’s workload increased (Augustus 2021; Okeke-Uzodike and Gamede 2021). Okeke-Uzodike and Gamede (2021) examined
components of workload at a South African university and reported that this increase in workload led to reduced research productivity and challenges in achieving a work–life balance in female academics.

On one evening before the conference, my colleague called me and started by apologising for being the person to call about work on a Friday evening. In addition to other work demands during exam season I worked on the conference preparations in the evenings. Traditional working hours were for administrative functions of teaching and learning, and the evenings were for the conference preparations and my PhD studies.

(Itumeleng)

My dining room was my office, right between the lounge and the kitchen. I think those lack of physical space boundaries speaks to the complete lack of boundaries I experienced in general during the lockdown, between work and my personal life . . .

(Bianca)

**Burnout**

A recurring thread in our experiences of organising the 7th SASPC and the article narrative thus far has been burnout due to added personal and vocational demands during the pandemic. The demands placed on employees during the pandemic are higher than in any other historical period (Coetzee and Rothmann 2004). The HE landscape has been identified for its highly competitive and performance driven environment within the globalisation economy (Coetzee and Rothmann 2004). However, research on the academics in HE remains limited. The need for such literature is highlighted in the limited academic literature available (Schmidt-Crawford, Thompson, and Lindstrom 2021), in combination with insights gleaned from online opinion pieces (Anonymous 2022; Gewin 2021; Renfrow 2020) and one notable research brief (Tugend 2020). Collectively, we experienced many of the symptoms and disturbances of burnout (Yıldırım and Solmaz 2022; Shoman et al. 2021).

Many of us felt disengaged and powerless. We were working harder but had nothing tangible to show for it. In an output driven environment, this was disempowering. There was an atmosphere of exhaustion. Yet, colleagues, even colleagues with Covid-19, were working without boundaries to meet institutional deadlines. We knew that this was not sustainable, we could see the cracks . . . but still absenteeism was an unspoken taboo.

(Janice)

During the last physical conference in 2019, the undergraduate students expressed their desire to participate more inclusively in the conference. They were passionate about being able to voice their own concerns and to talk about topics that were of relevance to them. We incorporated their suggestions by opening the conference to undergraduate symposiums of topics of relevance. We did not, however, receive any undergraduate symposiums despite appealing to academics to use this learning opportunity. Academics were also asked to present symposiums with their postgraduate students. There was only
one such submission. Conversations with academics that we had approached to present such symposiums all yielded the same answer. We were well over a year into the pandemic. Our colleagues felt overworked within the context of escalated work demands within the pandemic context. Informal conversations evidenced that many academics were experiencing burnout or were dealing with personal traumas or recovery due to the pandemic. Even though they valued the opportunities that the conference presented, they were overwhelmed.

As the organisers of the conference, we understood completely. We were also depleted. We were exhausted, both physically and mentally (Queen and Harding 2020) but did not have the luxury of attending to our well-being because of our challenging vocational space and changes in our personal lives in the context of Covid-19. We had been involved in previous conferences but lacked the online experience. This resulted in our relying heavily on the technical expertise of one of the authors who was responsible for tasks such as creating the conference website and managing the online submissions. The lack of online expertise from the rest of the organising committee meant an overwhelming amount of responsibility for this author and organiser.

We also had other work responsibilities. We were marking more than our mandated amount of exam scripts owing to a shortage of external markers, creating exam pools with three times the amount of exam questions to facilitate the randomisation of questions, and writing additional tutorial letters, exam questions and assignment questions for students affected by integrating two semesters into one super semester. We also had to attend to newly mandated online exam invigilation sessions of our students that originally lasted six hours to ensure that our students would have the opportunity to access their two-hour exam if they experienced electricity cuts, network disruptions or any other unforeseen circumstances. This created a huge strain on us as academics as we were now responsible for managing our students’ queries before and after the online sessions, assist with information communication technology issues as students experienced technological challenges that we were ill-equipped to assist with, while managing online discussion forums. This was further complicated by the introduction of an online invigilator application that placed additional demands on overstretched academics. And this was just tuition. We still needed to fulfil our research, community engagement and key performance indicators.

Lessons Learned and Implications for Further Action

First, life-long learning has become an essential habit of the progressive employee in the pandemic era. In this regard, our professional skills in online and digital technologies need to be upskilled to ensure that we use the latest innovations in service of our students. Second, working remotely has blurred personal and vocational boundaries. We have never found the need for establishing sustainable work–life balance strategies, more so than now. We believe that there should be institutional support for assisting
employees in learning these skills for sustained productivity in the work environment, in particular for women.

References


