2018 Surrey Doctoral College Conference Review

Vishavjeet Dhaliwal

Vishavjeet Dhaliwal: School of Biosciences and Medicine, Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences, University of Surrey. Email: vd00086@surrey.ac.uk

Copyright ©2019 Vishavjeet Dhaliwal; licensee SURJ. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International Licence.

ISSN: 2058-5551 (Online)
When I first learnt of the opportunity to attend an academic conference, I must admit I was somewhat hesitant. My immediate image of monotonous talks given by highly formal researchers was slightly daunting, but I was nonetheless intrigued. The University of Surrey’s Doctoral College Conference 2018 was themed ‘Breaking New Ground’, with presentations from postgraduate and early-career researchers. It was this theme that caught my interest: what was this innovative research taking place at Surrey and who were the people carrying it out?

Held on campus in the Austin Pearce building, the conference invited postgraduate researchers and staff to learn about research exploring new areas, championing new methodologies or challenging old concepts. The conference ran over two days, with each consisting of research presentations, punctuated by two keynote speakers. There was also the opportunity to participate in workshops, which focused on the importance of postgraduate skills such as networking or delivering compelling talks. Break times offered copious amounts of tea and coffee, with a chance to view research posters designed by postgraduate researchers and put some newly acquired networking skills into practice.

I was excited to learn more about postgraduate research and the experience of PhD students to inform my own career options. Moreover, as a biomedical science student, I was eager to hear about research from multiple disciplines including sociology, psychology, engineering and the arts. My interests span many areas, so the conference was the perfect opportunity to explore topics other than science. I was, therefore, excited at the variety in research content upon receiving the programme. My eye was immediately drawn to papers focusing on women’s equality, mental health and LGBT+ subjects. These are topics in which I have a keen interest but had not expected to encounter in this context, so I chose to attend the first day of talks as their content intrigued me the most.

The first presentation was particularly memorable. Monique Botha from the School of Psychology presented her research about the impact of community connectedness on the mental health of autistic populations. Despite numerous late entrances, Botha delivered an incredibly passionate presentation. Botha placed importance on her innovative method of directly interviewing autistic people and constructing their narratives. In doing this, she highlighted issues not explored in mainstream autistic research. For example, I felt the discomfort from the conference audience as Botha revealed that misogyny was very common among autistic men. It seems that internalised discrimination may be an unnoticed issue within the autistic community, making Botha’s research really valuable.
I believe the ground-breaking feature of her work was its vast intersectionality. Botha paid attention to her subjects’ ethnicity, gender identity and sexuality to see if these factors made any difference to results. For example, Botha’s interviewees noted the stereotype of autistic people as mainly white, asexual males. Botha nonetheless found that a substantial 25% of those interviewed were LGBT+, suggesting more research and potential support are needed for this autistic minority. Meanwhile, it was shocking to learn that autistic children of colour were often diagnosed much later than white children, preventing early treatment and limiting the help they need. This highlights how differences such as race can affect the experiences of autistic people, often because of stereotypes around the condition.

This attention to intersectionality, or the inclusion of minorities in research, became a recurring feature of the conference. It truly felt that the researchers were striving to notice and highlight these differences in their work. Moreover, the audience were also keen to question whether study findings applied across cultures, genders or sexualities. Such attention is needed if future research wishes to accurately study diverse populations while suggesting how inequalities can be removed.

The next presentation also reflected this rise in intersectionality. From the Department of Politics, OlgaFrańczak gave a presentation on how gender stereotypes are limiting women’s rights. She analysed Polish parliamentary debates on the ratification of the Council of Europe’s Istanbul Convention. This was centred on preventing and combating violence against women, with Frańczak focusing on the Convention’s redefinition of gender as a social construct and its drive to eliminate stereotypes.

The statistics of her study were surprising. 62% of parliamentary debates conveyed negative opinions towards the Convention, as did 86% of debates discussing the removal of gender stereotypes. Frańczak explained that gender stereotypes were strongly interlinked with cultural values in Poland. It was thus felt that by removing stereotypes around women, Polish traditions were directly under threat. Frańczak’s work, therefore, is incredibly progressive as it directly confronts deep-set views on gender. Her work is also significant considering the current controversy surrounding gender and its constant redefinition. Her research suggests that the key to breaking gender stereotypes may be educating different cultures on how gender equality does not mean sacrificing one’s traditions.

Despite the innovative nature of the conference, the papers often made me question the central theme. Was it that breaking new ground simply meant focusing on visible yet long
ignored topics? Why is including minorities in research so ground-breaking? As I mused on these ideas, the School of Psychology’s Fabio Fasoli gave his presentation. Fasoli was researching whether auditory cues can be used to predict an individual’s sexuality (auditory ‘gaydar’), and what this means for those being judged.

Unsurprisingly, he found that the voice is an inaccurate predictor of sexuality. However, it was his further research that fascinated the audience – judgments based on voice were primarily made towards gay men, and such stereotypes led to 40% of subjects experiencing discrimination due to their voices. I was then shocked to learn that in a study of employers hiring over the phone, men with typically ‘straight’ sounding voices were more likely to be offered a job with a higher salary than men with ‘gay’ sounding ones. Fasoli concisely explained his studies and emphasised the importance of his research in understanding auditory homophobia’s effects on gay men better.

I believe this research is also important in the current context of gender pay gaps. Perhaps it is not being female that limits wages and opportunities, but rather the perception of femininity. Once again, stereotypes seem to influence beliefs in society. Why are masculine traits seen as more valuable in the workplace, leading to discrimination against women and effeminate men? Fasoli’s presentation thus reminded me of the importance of Surrey’s research. Shedding light on the issues of minorities, which mainstream research often neglects, is vital in creating discussion about stereotypes and helping to dispel them.

Although I was initially tentative, the relaxed atmosphere of the conference and the diversity of its attendees was a welcome surprise. In a way, it reflected the varied nature of research at the University of Surrey. There were many opportunities for discussion with both speakers and poster presenters, who ensured that their studies were accessible to a multidisciplinary audience. Overall, the conference succeeded in displaying the new frontiers being explored by Surrey’s academics and gave me a better understanding of postgraduate research. It seems my initial fear of monotonous talks was unfounded and I instead learned from diverse and engaging presentations. A stark lack of diversity is still a reality in many disciplines, but it is exciting to know that the University champions research that is wider reaching and truly ground-breaking.

**Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Dr Nadya Yakovchuk, Editor-in-Chief of SURJ, and Julia Anthoney, Learning Development Adviser, for their guidance and helpful feedback.