

Discussion Transcript for Webinar #5: Be prepared, not (too) scared! How sociology graduate students can slay the conference thing

## [SLIDE 1]

### **Awish:**

Hello Everyone! Welcome and thank you for joining us for today's webinar, "Be prepared, not (too) scared! How sociology graduate students can slay the conference thing."

My name is Awish Aslam and I am the Chair and Central Rep for the CSA Student Concerns Subcommittee. Our committee also includes our Eastern Rep., Emma Kay, and our Western Rep., Nicole Malette.

### **Nicole:**

Hello, everyone!

### **Awish:**

We'd like to thank the Canadian Sociological Association for sponsoring this initiative and Sherry Fox, the Executive Director for the CSA, for working with us to plan and organize this series.

Our guest speaker is Dr. Mervyn Horgan, an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Guelph. Mervyn is active in a number of professional organizations. He is the Communications Officer for the Canadian Sociological Association, he is on the Board for the Sociological Theory Research Committee of the International Sociological Association, and he is a co-founder of the Canadian Network for Critical Sociology. Thank you very much for joining us today, Mervyn.

### **Mervyn:**

Thank you.

### **Awish:**

Before we begin, I would like to let audience members know that if you do have any questions during the webinar, you can submit those using the Q&A function, which you can find at the bottom of your screen. Your questions will be visible to all attendees and panelists, and audience members may also 'like' questions to prioritize them. Mervyn will address those questions during the Q&A period, following his presentation. Now, I will turn the webinar over to Mervyn.

### **Mervyn:**

Okay. Hi there, everybody. I hope you can hear me okay. I'd like to begin, as is thankfully customary in Canada, by acknowledging my presence in the City of Guelph, on Dish with One Spoon territory, the treaty lands and territories of the Mississaugas of the Credit, and the Between the Lakes Purchase Three lands and in Canada more generally, I want to acknowledge that we're all on traditional unceded and/or territory lands of First Nations, Inuit, and Metis people.

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Even though we are all embodied beings enmeshed in a range of connections with other human and nonhuman animals, we are now in this sort of weird interaction, which is not a kind of interaction that I, personally, am used to. I'm somebody who is interested in what happens when human beings are in the same place at the same time. I'm interested in copresence, and so a webinar strips away some but not all of that. So, I'm grateful that we're sharing this embodied space but also this virtual space.

Before I get into the webinar proper, I'd like to thank the Student Concerns Subcommittee for this initiative, to Awish Aslam, Emma Kay and Nicole Malette. It is brilliant to see grad students working collaboratively to advance the collective. This sort of initiative around thinking about training and professionalization into the discipline is really important.

And a fantastic addition to the range of initiatives that the CSA has undertaken in the past few years. I'd like also to give a shout out to the SCS for the really great statement that they brought to the CSA Executive around support for graduate students during the pandemic. It was clear and precise and is a model for other disciplines and institutions to follow across the country and internationally.

Finally, before I start, I'd like to also give a huge thanks to our Executive Director, Sherry Fox, whose work on behalf of the CSA has really advanced not just the association but also the discipline in Canada. Having served on the exec of the CSA, in a couple of different capacities over the last decade, I'm still blown away by the depth and range of her capacities. So, special thanks to Sherry as well!

### [SLIDE 2-4]

Sorry, I realize I should have been advancing slides there while Awish was doing her introduction, so I apologize for that. There's the slides that were prepared in advance. And there's me. Awish has already outlined how you can interact if you have questions. Okay. I promise I will be more on top of things from here on in.

### [SLIDE 5]

Here is a basic overview of today's webinar. I'm going to begin by talking about the conference puzzle a little bit, or a couple of puzzles about conferences. Generally, when we talk about conferences, the primary concern that people have are their presentations, but I kind of want to change our thinking about that just a little bit. I'll talk about some ways we might think about conferences, the variety of conference experiences that we might have, kind of a topology of conferences as a continuum, and I'd like to really start off, in a couple of minutes, just by thinking about conference presentations as a genre. Then we get to the core elements of the conference experience. Like I said, we tend to think of presenting our work as the primary function of conferences, but really, there's a lot happening at conferences, and presenting our work is a tiny proportion of our time at conferences. Attending presentations is probably the primary thing. Other sorts of formal involvements,

which I'll touch on very, very briefly. And then we'll talk in closing about some informal elements of the conference experience. But then I'll give some general pointers, but the real core of the presentation will be those four points of attending, presentations, presenting, and informal elements is what we'll focus on.

### [SLIDE 6]

Okay, so before we do that though, Sherry has created a little poll, just to get a sense of some of our participants' experiences so far. I'll give you 30 seconds to submit your answer to that poll. It just basically asks, "Have you ever attended a conference? Have you ever presented? And if so, how did it go?"

Okay, great. So, everyone's been to one, or everyone who's responded, all of our respondents have been to a conference. Many of you have you presented, some of you haven't. That's good. The "meh's" have it on the experience of going to conferences. Some good, plenty of good experiences, or great experiences, but as they often go, often conferences are strange sorts of beasts.

### [SLIDE 7]

Now we'll get into the kind of bones of the presentation. One part of the puzzle is that, conferences are sort of characterized by some kind of fundamental tensions at their heart. Sociologists like fundamental tensions at the heart of any phenomenon. First, they're sort of essential to our work as a community of sociologists, but we're not obliged to attend. It's something that's essential to us as researchers, but as individuals we're not obliged to attend. The conference will go on whether or not you decide to show up. And maybe (and interestingly) conferences are simultaneously completely terrifying and really fun. They can be both of those things at the same time. There's no contradiction there. They can be terrifying and fun. Not quite like bungee jumping, but maybe.

The essential part of conferences is it's where a community of scholars come together to share and debate ideas, to learn about what our colleagues are doing. They sort of have a ritual dimension, right? There are formal parts. They can be solemn. They can be celebratory. But ultimately, as sociologists we gather because we have a shared belief in it and a commitment to critique and received wisdoms, to think together about alternative futures, and to advancing knowledge of the discipline, more generally. Whether that's kind of straightforward sorts of scientific advancements and innovation, but sort of the kinds of reflexivity and critique that we're interested in sociology too. There's space for all of that sort of work in sociology.

I think the reasons why conferences are essential but not obligatory kind of feed into the reasons why they're both terrifying and fun as well. They're terrifying simply because that's where a community of scholars come together to share a debate ideas. We put ourselves into our ideas, we worry about how our ideas, how our work would be received, how others

would respond to our work and our ideas. Were concerned they'll think less of us, right? That's generally, I think, kind of a characteristic feeling of conferences. This is a basic part of academic life. It's the fear of judgment that's characteristic of life in general and of academic life, in particular, and the conference scene very specifically. I guess the thing to remember when we think about conferences as terrifying is that the vast majority of people who are at conferences are there to learn and to share ideas.

There are various performative elements and things that we talk about, but really, you are part of a community of scholars. You're there with other people who have committed themselves professionally to be part of a community of scholars and to share your ideas and research. I like to keep that in mind when I'm terrified. But trust me, the terror does not go away. You just get better at maybe handling it, I think.

### [SLIDE 8]

In a moment I'm going to dig down into the elements of the conference experience and about presentations in particular. Before we get to that, I'd like us to maybe think a little bit about some different ways that we might think about conferences in general.

### [SLIDE 9]

We could think about sort of varieties of conferences. They vary massively through disciplinary differences. For example, if you've ever been at a philosophy conference, even a philosophy talk, the sort of style at a philosophy conference is generally very combative, right? It's really about the sort of connection between the person and their ideas. And people really, really go at it, poking holes in arguments. In psychology, for example, it tends to be (many psychology conferences tend to emulate sort of natural sciences) really about methodological rigor and about, kind of, very precise kinds of findings. In sociology, we're sort of, we have many--we're sort of a big tent, if you like, sort of discipline. So there are big disciplinary differences in the style that kind of happens at conferences.

There are also national and regional differences. The CSA annual meetings are very different in feel to the American Sociological Association (ASA), for example which tends to have a really, very highly professionalized kind of feel that seems quite competitive. I think we have a sort of a more collegial, sort of a vibe, generally, my sense is at least at the CSA. And then there are also differences in regional conferences. I've been to the Eastern Sociological Society in the US, which is a lot closer to the feel of the CSA due to its size. There are various kinds of differences by association as well.

Then we can think about the basic characteristics of conferences. Conferences that are gender-imbalanced in some way will generally have a different sort of a feel. If they differ demographically; if there's a lot of older, very well established faculty, or if it's more heavily weighted towards junior faculty or graduate students, there would be a very different sort of a feel at that conference. One of the big ones, I guess, is difference of scale, right? Giant

conferences, big conferences, you know, 5, 6, 7 thousand person conferences, let's say, like the ASA, American Sociological Association, or the International Sociology Association, World Congress, but even our own CSA, at times, because it's part of the wider Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences can sometimes feel impersonal. But often that can create space for sorts of casual encounters and informal sociability that might not otherwise happen at smaller conferences. Smaller types of conferences, small-scale conferences, that are like a small working group kind of conferences, can be great because you get a very strong sociable feel and a camaraderie emerges at them. However, there could also be conflicts that emerge that taint the social elements of those sorts of conferences. And then a sort of a kind of an alien from the planet Zog watching a conference will be kind of amazed, I'm sure, to watch the differences in style and decorum that you find at conferences. How dressed up people are. I've noticed a sort of a creep of more formal attire at the CSA conference, over the last decade, I think. At the American conference, you tend to see a lot of Dicky bows on men, which you don't see as much of at the CSA, for example, but little sorts of differences like these that can be kind of instructive. So getting a sense of these kind of variations can help us attune to the sort of culture of the conference we're going to.

### [SLIDE 10]

A really over-simplified way of thinking about a typology of conferences (which can help you to think about your involvement and how you might think about pitching your work) is to think about whether it is a generalist conference, big conferences that are for the discipline in general. CSA, ISA, like I mentioned, ASA, British Sociological Association.

We could think about more specialist conferences. We have an element of that with within our own Association through research clusters. Some people tend to just hang out within their research clusters and just go to papers within those sessions. So, it begins to get a feel of a specialist conference. The International Sociological Association Research Committees have interim conferences in between the World Congress. Those tend to be much more specialist on theory or urban sociology, whatever your field might be. We could think of more hyper-specialized conferences. Say there's a conference on the settlement experiences of Syrian refugees in Canada. That's a really specialized type of conference, where it's going to feature very specific kinds of expertise. There will be types of things that you probably do or don't need to say in your setup at a more specialized conference.

Then we can think about, more generally, interdisciplinary conferences, and those vary, like crazy. These tend to be topic focussed, generally.

Thinking about what type of conference you're going to and where you're presenting, can kind of help you think about what level of detail will be necessary, for example, in setting up your paper. If you're in a generalist conference, and it's just a general sort of a session on something or other and you're talking about settler colonialism, for example, you might need to define that. But at a conference on decolonizing the university, you probably don't need

to spend much time talking about what settler colonialism is, right? Unless you're dealing with a controversial type of definition of that term, for example.

**[SLIDE 11]**

Now we can think about conferences again in a different way, kind of on a continuum between really highly professionalized conferences where people are well dressed, where you submit a paper, six months to a year in advance that's fully polished. This would be the sort of ASA model, a very professional sort of model.

Then we could think of more semi-formal, informal, private conferences and everything in between. For example, this level of informality can be found at graduate conferences that tend to be often quite small. We have one at the University of Guelph that's quite small, very friendly, collegial, sort of a supportive kind of environment. But then there's everything in between.

And that can kind of help you to think about what sort of work you might want to submit or what stage work should be at. At a highly professionalized conference that requires a full paper in advance, that's going to be quite different than giving a paper at a conference maybe where you're permitted or where there's a sort of a general feel that people are kind of thinking out loud or working through ideas. None of these is better or more important than any of the others I would say. They all have their place in sort of ecology of our discipline in developing and disseminating knowledge.

**[SLIDE 12]**

Another way is to think about conference presentations, in particular, as a genre. Not all presentations of our research happen at conferences. Presentations of our research at conferences are a particular kind. So, you can think about the presentation as genre. There are lots of related kinds of genres. In-class presentations, job talks, my sixth-grade child's project presentation for her class, public talks at your local library, three minutes thesis kind of talks, right? Which I'm not a huge fan of as a model. TEDx kind of talks, defenses, senate committee hearings. Presentations about presentations, are also genres, right? Expert witness testimonials, job talks, etcetera. They're all different sorts of genres that are related, but are not precisely the same. They give us some sorts of principles that are useful for thinking about what a conference presentation is. There's a mountain of material out there on presenting at conferences, but thinking about it as a genre is useful. Because genre is something that has conventions.

A convention is a recurring way of doing things, in a very basic sort of a way that's sort of accepted within a field. If you want to have a quick chuckle that highlights conventions in scientific presentations, there's a famous presentation about a decade ago at the American Association of the Advancement of Science. If you go to YouTube, just Google, or just search on YouTube. If you go to YouTube and search for, "Chicken, Chicken, Chicken,"

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there is a pretty funny informative presentation that consists of one single word repeated over and over, and kind of plays with the idea of conventions.

Genres have conventions, and part of what we need to do is learn some of the conventions because that helps you to kind of fit in. But also, what we know from work in the sociology of the arts, for example, on artistic conventions, is that by understanding conventions, we learn how to play with them. It's by knowing the conventions of a genre, that you can innovate within them and push at them, and hopefully have a little bit of fun.

Now we could get all Bourdieusian here and discuss the relationship between your habitus and the field, your position in the field and your ability to play with conventions, but this presentation's not in that kind of genre, okay, so I won't do that.

**[SLIDE 13]**

Okay, so what is it that we do at conferences?

**[SLIDE 14]**

There are four core elements of the conference experience, right? Or another way to think about that, the time that you spend at conferences is kind of split into four parts. It consists of four things. You attend the presentations. You present your work, and as I mentioned presenting your work, you know, proportionately it takes up a massive amount of our mental energy. It takes very little of the actual time that we spend at a conference. But then we could think about other formal involvements that we would have at conferences. These would be things like research committee meetings, session organizing, session chairing, perhaps, acting as a discussant, other kinds of formal involvements we might have as officers, etcetera. And then sort of informal, socializing sorts of elements of the conference.

We tend to focus overwhelmingly, like I said, on presenting. That makes sense, because this is where each of us and our work are the focus of attention. It's where we're literally on stage. We'll of course talk about that, but truth be told, our own presentations of our own research are far from the only place where the action is at conferences.

**[SLIDE 15]**

Attending presentations is really instructive for a number of reasons. It's the single best way to learn how to become a better presenter, I would say. Besides doing your own presentations, attending other presentations is the single best way to become a better presenter. Most obviously, you attend presentations to learn about new research in your field, in the discipline generally, but you also learn a sort of hidden curriculum. That, you know, sociologists of education can identify the hidden curriculum. The things you learn that aren't actually being explicitly stated. You learn about the generalized expectations within conferences for presentations in a disciplinary subfield.

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When you're attending presentations, it's not necessarily just about the content. You learn about different styles of presenting, you see what works, what doesn't work. How do people open talks? I really like thinking about how you open a talk. How do you open a paper when you're writing a paper? How do people open? How do presenters hook an audience in? How do they get you interested? Like a colleague of mine, Jesse Carlson, a sociologist in Nova Scotia, talks about your openings as a kind of clearing of the throat. How do people, make it evident that they're about to begin something? So, when you're attending presentations, you're learning about content, but you're also learning about style, strategy, and things that work and things that don't.

I would say that an important part of about attending presentations is that you give presenters your attention. It's important, right? Adopt the Golden Rule. Treat others like you would like to be treated. I think it's especially the case in presentations that are poorly attended (which, truth be told, are often the places where you have the most interesting kinds of conversations) because they do tend to become a little looser and more informal. But I think it's important to give people your attention, as you might expect them to give you their attention.

I guess, sort of a way in, if you're particularly anxious about presenting yourself is, I would absolutely encourage people to ask questions at presentations. Asking questions - that's an important part of attending presentations. It's being part of the actual dialogue that's happening in that space. I have been to many conferences. My heart still races in my chest when I begin thinking about asking a question. I wonder to myself if I'm going to blush as I speak, especially if I'm thinking of a question that may challenge something about what the speaker says, or if there's a lot of other people in the room, or if it's a presenter is a prominent scholar but it's something that I really want to ask. You'll have evidence of being courteous when you ask a question. There's a nice piece put together a few years ago by Jim Conley and Mark Stoddart that's on the CSA website. "Modest Proposals for Conference Participants," If you search it on the CSA conference website, you'll find it. There are very basic things that are worth stating. Stand if you can and say your name. Make sure the presenter you're addressing can actually see you and preferably that the audience can see you. If there's a mic, use it. That's a basic issue of accessibility and often the mic is present because there may be a recording made of keynote talks, etc.

And then, in terms of asking questions (and it's a good way to help you with nerves a little bit too) it's important to ask somebody about what they've done rather than what they haven't done. It's a lot more interesting and a lot fairer to ask somebody about what they've done. Deal with the presentation on the terms that the presenter has set rather than on your own agenda. We want to have that sort of generosity in our thinking with others. Asking somebody to think with you. But I would say also, if you're too nervous to ask a question or if you prefer to chat informally, by all means, hang around afterwards, approach the presenter. Sometimes you'll see big line ups for talks. Usually, say at CSA sessions, research cluster sessions, there's an opportunity afterwards to chat informally with presenters. If you're genuinely interested in someone's work, they are more often than not interested in

what you have to say. Especially for student presentations, that's certainly the case, I think. And everyone is nervous, right? Everyone appreciates when their work is taken seriously, and when other scholars engage with it.

One other point I would say about attending presentations, which is not on this PowerPoint, but I would say, if you're at a conference, by all means go to the talks in your area, the talks you want to see, but also get yourself out of your comfort zone. Listen to what people across the place are saying. Go to something in a different research cluster or in an area that you maybe know a little bit about or don't know very much about but have some vague sort of interest in. There's a sort of a sharing of knowledge, and it could trigger ideas for yourself. And you learn different styles just by this. If I go to a conference, I generally try and attend one session that's sort of out of my comfort zone or my area in some way. Because you learn a lot and it drives your thinking in new sorts of directions.

### [SLIDE 16]

Presenting our work. This is where I'm going to focus for a little bit so this is going to take me a little time to get through this.

### [SLIDE 17]

Preparing and presenting our work. The first thing I'm going to talk about is that presenting is drag but here is the basic structure. Whether or not you should script, using your time, use of slides, a basic structure, a tentative structure that I would say is written in stone, just a basic idea for a structure of a research talk, thinking a little bit about openings and closings. The thing that we sometimes dread, where our hearts beat the most when the present, is dealing with questioners.

### [SLIDE 18]

Judith Butler is right. Goffman is right. Social life is performance. Right? You are sociologists, we know that. Presenting at a conference is very explicitly performative. The best presenters seem 'natural' and I put that in inverted commas. A good presenter seems natural because good presenters are those who play at, perform, who do drag as a good presenter. It is an explicitly performative environment. All social life is performance, but this is where you are actually explicitly performing so you don't need to apologize for that. It's difficult for it to feel natural and that's because it is a staged performance. And that's okay. A natural performance is one that looks natural, where somebody performs the natural, I think. Again, we're not going to dig down too deep into the layers of interaction and theories of performance here.

**[SLIDE 19]**

To script or not to script. If it's a big presentation - me personally, if I'm exceptionally nervous, I will script the whole thing. Every word. Every single word. The jokes, the pauses, the slides, whatever it is. If I'm trying to be funny, I will insert jokes.

I was at a conference as a graduate student, many years ago, in the US. It was it was one of those with speeches and presentations while people had dinner. I ended up sitting next to a person who at the time, I didn't know them, but they were a prominent literary scholar, who was giving a pre-banquet presentation. We chatted for a bit, and they asked me for a couple of minutes to look over their paper. This is a scholar who was in their 70s. So out of the corner of my eye, I see them make small edits to their paper, a fully printed script of their paper, insert pauses into their opening lines. This is somebody who has clearly done hundreds if not thousands of formal presentations. I watched as they edited the opening lines and inserted a little comment about something somebody had said in a previous paper in a previous session. I watched them stick in a little pun, and I saw them shaking. This is a well-established, prominent scholar. And then they got up and just nailed the presentation. They barely looked at their notes, but just occasionally looked down purely using the script as a prompt to help them stay on track.

If you have a script, it means you're really close to the material. Scripts help with nerves because it means you have notes if necessary. It also forces you to practice and having a script, the act of writing it out, forces good editing, and it really aids in memory. If I have a script for something, I'll find that I actually don't end up referring to it too much. But if I lose my train of thought, or I get flustered a little bit, I know I have it to lean on. Even if you have a script, you will often find because you have crafted it a little bit that you actually end up being able to riff freely a little bit and it helps you to relax a little bit. You don't need to use one, I find them useful. I'm getting better at not using them though. I have a script right here for this presentation, for example.

**[SLIDE 20]**

Time. Golden Rule here is never, ever, ever go over. I'm probably going to break that rule myself here, but this is slightly different because I have a captive audience and it's only one paper. But never, ever, ever go over. The key here is to obviously have practiced and to have a sense of how long it's going to take. But be ready to cut to the chase if necessary. If you're told you have two minutes left, where are you going to go with that paper? You're going to get right to your findings or to your sort of contribution, you want to be able to cut to that quickly if necessary. It's very easy to run out of time, especially when we're nervous. Presentations go very, very quickly. You can ask the chair of a session to give you time prompts, and you can ask them for additional prompts if that helps you stay on track. But again, never, ever, ever go over. That's really just as a courtesy to your co-presenters too and to give the audience time to ask questions.

**[SLIDE 21]**

Slides. I'm a fan of less is more slides. Slides are very, very useful. But they could also force us into very linear sorts of ways of thinking or organizing our arguments, which doesn't work for all sorts of arguments that we might want to make. Big text and clear images are important. Think of your audience, generally for slides and for speaking, is the person at the back of the room. Can they see? If you've got a table and it's got really tiny, tiny text in it and the person at the back of the room can't see it, it's going to be hard for people to engage with the material. Think about the person at the back of the room as the audience for your voice and for your visuals if you're using a lot of visuals.

If your slides tell the whole story on their own, there might be just too much going on in the slides. We want to be able to hear a little bit about what you have to say. And then something that people do, particularly if they're doing papers that have a lot of stats and tables in them, it can be useful to have slides in reserve that you don't actually use. Then if a question comes up, you say, "Oh, yes, well I did actually run that by gender." You can pull that up as a slide that you had, but you just didn't get a chance to talk about.

**[SLIDE 22]**

Basic structure. I'm calling this "a basic structure" not "the basic structure." There's no magic formula. Think about the ways you can do a presentation between sort of exposition, demonstration, findings. A good way to start is to begin with an opening puzzle or a tension. A contradiction, a startling stat, or an interesting statistic. It doesn't have to be a big attention grabber. It could be something really banal, like, "Hey, conferences are fun and terrifying at the same time." Okay, that's a kind of a banal statement. But you know, it gets a little bit of attention. It's a puzzle. Why is a conference both of those things? That's an easy sort of a hook, kind of a lame one, but these kinds of connections can be appreciated by audiences, I think. It might help to sort of set the scene a little bit.

Then you spend a couple of minutes on scene setting. I'm not even going to give lit review its own heading in the basic structure of a talk. Presenters in sociology, in many disciplines, often lean really, really heavily on lit reviews but lit reviews can be done really quickly. Your paper proper, the paper you publish, the dissertation chapter could have an amazing lit review, but lit reviews generally are not especially interesting for people in the audience. We're more interested in what you have to say than what other people have said about the thing that you're talking about. Use your lit review to give a brief background or justification for your study. Don't waste 12 to 15 minutes on what somebody else has said. The audience is here for what you have to say. Spend a minute on your research question, maybe less. Get us to your design and methods quite quickly. You'll see these are all very short. We're saving our time for getting to the stuff that we're actually here for, the findings. The actual things that are novel that are interesting about your study in particular.

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You obviously can't present everything. Let's say you've done 50 interviews, and you've got eight amazing themes from your interviews, you can't reasonably tell us about all eight of those themes without rushing through them. What about the three that were most exciting or that challenge existing literature? What really piqued your interest, or that people really seemed to focus on in your interviews, for example.

Then you can link back to your opening puzzle to close with the implications, new directions, other possibilities, what you'd like to do with this research next. Are you challenging, confirming, nuancing existing research? What are the new cases? Where can this can take us?

So that's a basic idea for structure. There are many different kinds of ways around how to structure a talk. But I think a key one for grad students, in particular, is not to spend too much time on a lit review, if you have some research done. Lit reviews are interesting and important, but for conference presentations, it's good for us to learn about what your actual research is doing, is going to do, or has done.

### [SLIDE 23]

I think it's important to think about openings and closings. Really, the most important thing I would say about openings, besides the kind of posing a puzzle paradox (which is a useful kind of a way to start) is, do not start a presentation with, "I'm sorry." "I'm sorry for being unprepared." It's okay to say you're nervous, that's fine. But don't apologize for the fact that you're presenting and that you are not prepared. Don't apologize that this is an exploratory study. You don't need to apologize for that. You just tell us that that's the case. That's fine. Okay.

And then, in terms of closings, the conclusion of the paper doesn't have to be earth shattering. We tend not to make earth-shattering findings in sociology. A lot of what we do is nuance, finesse existing knowledge. I think the thing to aim for is clarity and precision in your conclusions, in your closings. Right? Clarity and precision. Okay, so no apologies. That's important. Don't apologize for your work. Apologize for being nervous, but not for your work.

### [SLIDE 24]

Questions and questioners. Thank your questioners. If you bullsh\*t an answer, people can smell it. If you don't know the answer to something or you're really challenged by something, it's okay to say, "You know what, that's something I haven't thought about or something I'll have to think about." "I'm not familiar with that paper you mentioned, that's clearly something I need to read." Those are all perfectly legitimate sorts of answers, if you don't have an answer to give. It's a difficult spot to think on your feet.

One thing that we often are concerned about is with questions is it's not necessarily the question that's asked, but the demeanor or the tone of the question asker that can throw us. Sometimes it's not actually the question, it's the way it's asked that could kind of throw us. I would say generally, don't interrupt a questioner, unless they're droning on, and then in that case, you could sort of appeal to the chair and ask the chair to intervene. Questions that are unkind or ungenerous, can be snubbed. A snub is very powerful in social interaction. Aggressive kinds of questioning don't really need to be tolerated. If you really need to, you could slip a note to the chair saying, you know, "Can you move us on from this?" Or it's good for you to say, "Look, it's good. This is clearly something you're very passionate about. It's good that we move on, hear other voices, share thoughts of other presenters, hear from other people in the audience." That's a perfectly okay thing to say. And you'll find that often you will have many allies in the room who are thinking similar sorts of things if someone is being particularly aggressive or unkind in the questioning.

One thing about questions is, when you present, don't present and then leave immediately. I think it's good generally to hang around. Even if it goes badly, hang around. Sometimes people want to ask a question, and they're nervous. Or somebody else hogs all the time, somebody asks a long-winded question, and somebody gives a long-winded answer, and people don't get to ask the questions they had, so it's good to hang around afterwards. The chair might miss a hand that went up during the question time for somebody who was about to ask a question of you that you have been wondering about yourself and would really like to talk about with them.

As a grad student, I presented at a conference and I hung around afterwards and I had a senior retired scholar came up to me afterwards. I had quoted her work and referenced her work in the paper. We chatted a bit, and then eventually this ended up within a year we ended up into us doing a little research project together and publishing a paper. Because I had referenced her work in a paper and then I had hung around after the paper, shuffling my bits and pieces of paper, and we ended up having a chat, so it's worth hanging around afterwards.

## [SLIDE 25]

Other considerations that you might want to think about a little that are sort of basic day-of sorts of things; arrive early, get your props in order, get your slides in order. If you're presenting from an iPad or from paper, make sure it's in big font, and you can see it. Check your tech, twice. Make sure that your slides are working, bring some water, bring some mints, which is what I like to do at least.

As I mentioned, who are you addressing? Think about the person at the back of the room as your audience. If you address a person at the back of the room, you are more likely to maintain the interest and attention of everyone between you and the people at the back of the room. Whereas if you just address it to the people at the very front row, it tends to--this

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is similar for teaching in big classes, for example, you tend to lose people who are further back.

Making eye contact, things like that. Some people like to scan a room, some people do patterned sort of movements around a room to try to keep themselves on track. Having friends in the room is good. A friend who nods at everything you say when you catch their eye, that can be great.

One thing that people sometimes think about is the peril of humor. Conferences often have this sort of a stodgy or a formal feel, so small jokes and puns could kind of be relatively easy, but they could also be received in a variety of sorts of ways. We often deal with serious topics, and there may be an element of judgment to our use of humor. It tends to be easier for more senior scholars to use humor, for example. See how other people use humor to see what works.

And I guess, finally, other considerations a presenter is thinking about are nerves. I like to think being nervous means that I care. The fact that I'm nervous about a presentation means that I care because I'm putting myself out there but also, I get nervous because I respect the judgment, and the ideas, and the feelings of my peers and of my colleagues. I am interested in what they think of what I have to say. So, my nerves are sort of a reflection of my kind of personal investment and my interest in the field. I have done more than 50 presentations, but every single time I get vomitously nervous! Even for this kind of weird webinar sort of one. My stomach is at me, my pulse races, the devil on my shoulder is telling me that I'm useless, that this is nonsense. And this is before I even get to the room where I'm presenting! We're all nervous. We probably just wear it differently. And so being nervous means that we care about what we're saying, we respect those that we're speaking to, we care about our ideas and our research. Being nervous means that you care.

I don't think there's a way to get rid of them. The best way is to harness them by preparing. Being overprepared is never really a problem. Being under-prepared is what the problem is. Being underprepared leads to an extra terrifying and nervous lead up. Then it's scrambling the night before, the day of, and afterwards, almost always feeling that it went badly. Ultimately though, a presentation is really short. If it's 20 minutes, it's short. If it goes well, time will fly. If it doesn't go well, time will also fly. Right? Many people will attend 10-15 presentations at a conference, so if it doesn't go well, you won't be remembered forever. People will forget about it quickly enough. And people are generally generous, I would say. If there are questions about some parts of that, I'm happy to sort of answer those afterwards.

## **[SLIDE 26]**

On to the third part of the elements of the conference experience.

**[SLIDE 27]**

Other formal involvements can be things like organizer, chair, discussant, going to formal meetings, etc. Those are all sorts of avenues for you to explore or experiences you can have to kind of help hone your craft or to meet others with similar interests.

**[SLIDE 28]**

I kind want to rush a little bit to the more informal parts.

**[SLIDE 29]**

There are many kind of bits in this section. I'm not a huge fan of the word networking. But we have formal opportunities for networking, semi-formal. At the CSA, we have the speed meeting kind of model of moving around where graduate students get to meet faculty, which has been a good success at our last conference. There are many sorts of semi-formal opportunities like research cluster meetings and things like that, that often become sort of informal afterwards. And then there's very informal things at the Congress. There's the beer tent or the book fair where you are wandering around and randomly bump into people.

I would say one thing that people are sometimes concerned about is that they really want to talk to a senior scholar in their field, for example. I would say it's perfectly legitimate before a conference to email somebody who's prominent in your field or who's work you've read and say, "Hey, I see that you're presenting at the CSA," let's say. "I'm really interested in the work that you've published on whatever it is that you're interested in. It would be great to have an opportunity to sit down and chat with you a little bit more. My work is on this." People are generally delighted to know that folks are reading their work, and are taking it seriously, and are thinking about it. So cold calls in advance are good. Those are fine. It's okay to reach out to people. And the worst that happens is they ignore you or they say, "Sorry, I'm really busy." That's not a big deal. Better to try than not, I think.

Then think about senior colleagues, whether they're people in your department, faculty members, advisory committee members, peers in your program, or who you know, across the country or in the discipline, as people who can help you, who can mediate introductions, who can introduce you to scholars or other people you might be interested in. Ask your advisor, "Hey, I see you were in graduate school with x y, z scholar. Is there any chance you could introduce us?" That's a way that often makes it a little bit easier than straight cold call, if you like.

A part, I think, that's very important as part of the conference experience, that's probably the most--besides presenting--that's the most anxiety provoking, is the standing around and feeling really awkward, right? Especially if you don't know very many people. If you are in a circle of people chatting, you don't lose by expanding your circle and including the person who's hovering on the edge and seems kind of nervous. You don't generally lose by expanding your circles and generating more interactions and having more expansive kinds of

conversations with a wider range of people. I think that's generally a positive thing. There can be negative elements to it, but I think it's better to try to bring people in than to actively exclude people.

And then, I think the most important is the food. If there's food somewhere, follow it. If there's free food, in particular, go where that is, because that's where there's going to be lots of people. And the existence of free food gives you small talk initially. "Oh hey, the spinach pies are really good." Whatever it is, it gives you sort of an in. Those are the sort of informal little bits. The most active spot at our conference generally is when one of the publishers/sponsors coffee and cookies at the registration desk, where Sherry, the executive director, is sitting. You can end up having random conversations with people there. Or you might meet somebody you haven't met in a while, and you're like, "Oh hey, how are you doing? I haven't seen you in a while." So, follow the food. Very important part of the conference experience, I would say. I still do it!

### [SLIDE 30]

Some other general pointers. Always assume when you're talking to somebody that they're a faculty member. If the person is a graduate student, they will be flattered. But if they're a faculty member and you mistake them for a graduate student (not that that's insulting) they might not like that, but generally if you assume that somebody is a faculty member, that's an okay mistake to make.

And then I guess one kind of thing I'd like to close on, I guess, is thinking about involvements at conferences and in professional life more generally, as an academic. If you orient to your fellow grad students, your colleagues, and your peers as competitors, you will generally drive yourself up the walls. You never lose by being collegial. You never lose by having a sort of a collaborative ethos. Asking pointed questions is great, but going after somebody for the sake of going after somebody in questioning, for example, it's just kind of petty. If you already orient your peers on purely competitive terms, then it's kind of hard to have fun. It makes it a really anxiety provoking sort of experience. So obviously, we have to be kind of instrumentally rational. People are trying to develop careers and things. But that doesn't mean that we have to let the competitive logic run what's happening. We're not in a zero sum game when it comes to advancing knowledge. I think you better the discipline in general when you think about scholarship, our scholarly community as just that. It's a community of scholars. And I think having a sort of ethos of mutual support within that community helps us all. And then something else that I would say is, don't waste your time on people who treat you poorly at conferences. If somebody is rude or snubs you, that sucks, but that's okay. Don't waste your time. You can have horrible scholarly interactions with people on email, in journals, you know, at formal presentations, but in terms of the social parts of conferences, don't stand for the sort of poor treatment.

**[SLIDE 31]**

Key takeaways, prepare. I like scripting, you don't have to, but prepare. Prepare for presenting. Be generous in your participation by attending others, and being generous in your in your questions, and in your engagements with other presentations. Remember that ultimately, we're here to learn about one another's work. So hopefully we can have some fun doing that.

**[SLIDE 32]**

But if all else fails...

**[SLIDE 33]**

Play conference bingo. American sociologists have, for a number of years, at the ASA, generated conference bingo sheets that you can play with that are sometimes a little bit cruel and sometimes a little bit funny, but you can have some fun with that.

**[SLIDE 34]**

Okay. I'm more than happy to take any questions that you might have. So Awish, I think you're going take over.

**Awish:** Thank you. Thanks for that really, really helpful presentation Mervyn. Alright, so I'm just going to read out the questions that we received from audience members.

**Question 1** – Due to our limited funding opportunities as grad students, there are only so many conferences we can attend. Would it be more beneficial for us to present at larger scale conferences or smaller specialized conferences?

**Answer** – That's great question. Funding is obviously a big issue, always. I know that students in very competitive programs at the bigger schools in Canada, for example, would be told, "Go to the ASA. That's the only one that counts." That's a particular sort of an orientation to the discipline, I think, that I personally don't agree with. Lots of interesting things happen at the ASA, but I think there's often a sort of an inward-facing kind of a very club-ish sort of feel to the really professionalized kind of conferences. But it is an amazing experience because it's so big and it is so professional. If forced to choose I guess, it probably depends, in part, on where you're at with your research. If there's a specialist conference coming up it's probably a really good idea for you to hit that conference.

There are pockets of funding you can try and tap, but it's not something you can make a call on right away that you should go to this one or that one. The CSA Conference for example. I started going when I was a graduate student and have been going pretty consistently since. I have seen it become much more professional, but also kind of friendlier, more collegial. I

think that's partly because I've gotten to know more people maybe. But I think always a good place to get a sense of what's happening in the discipline, in the country, in Canada, for example. And who's doing work on what. And even if people aren't presenting, you get to hear people refer to studies by other people that are on topic in Canadian sociology.

I can't kind of give a definitive answer to that question. Big conferences can be really interesting and terrifying, but also those specialist conferences, if they're really on point for you, are a really good thing as a grad student. Because you get to meet people who are doing exactly the type of work you're doing, and it can really help you to develop that sort of smaller network of people who are right on topic.

**Question 2** – At conferences, it is not uncommon for grad students to be on a panel/in a session with more well-known researchers. How do you suggest we try to situate ourselves with more big names, scholars in our field and not be too intimidated?

**Answer** – That's a great question. It's terrifying if that happens, if you're lucky enough, I guess, right? If you're on a panel, especially with a well-known researcher, and you are a new entrant to a field and there's somebody who's well established and well known and highly cited in that field, that is terrifying. Acknowledging your nerves is totally fine. But it's great to be on a panel with somebody, like X person who is so prominent in the field. I guess the thing to remember that it can be intimidating and nerve-wracking to be in that sort of situation. But you also think about it as an opportunity to expose a top scholar in your field, a well-known researcher, to your work. So that's a fantastic opportunity.

That is a motivation to be very well prepared. And also, because we're a community of scholars, that means that we also challenge one another. We ask people for clarification of things. If you have something to say about that's the person's work, you don't go for the person, but for their work. If you have something to say, or you notice, the work you're doing is critiquing their work, or is going beyond it, or is kind of revisiting a question that they've left behind and have assumed has been answered. Talking about those kind of things can be useful. You earn respect by engaging in dialogue with people in your field. That's respected in a positive sense. That's a good thing. But I would say like the basic rule of preparing, I would script.

I did a paper once as a grad student paper, and we had a discussant who was super combative, who attacked our paper in particular. That was terrifying. I can't say I have the precise answer for that. But I know I was very prepared for the presentation. And I had a sense that this scholar might have a thing or two to say, so I had a couple of lines about how I might respond. I would treat it as a wonderful opportunity to engage with that person and some of the questions that you're asking that are connected to the questions that they've asked. But that part of intimidation is probably going to be there, regardless. What you often find is you might be intimidated because you've been amazed by someone's work. And then when you meet people, they're just more human. There are people who are not very nice around the place but generally, most scholars are awkward. Lots of sociologists are

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very awkward. People generally, really appreciate the fact that someone has read and has taken their work seriously. If they're engaging it, even if they're engaging it critically, like that's a positive thing for a scholar. Most papers that are written by academics languish largely unread. The fact that someone's work is read and respected and engaged with is appreciated. Most scholars are delighted to engage with people coming up in their respective fields who are willing to engage.

**Question 3** – How do grad students prepare for roundtable presentations? How is preparation for these similar or different to other presentations?

**Answer** – Very good question. Roundtables have a slightly different feel in general. They vary. Different associations or organizations do them slightly differently, but they generally tend to feel more informal. They have that beautiful social shape of a circle, they're round so they have a much more egalitarian sort of a feel. There isn't that sort of monological transmission of knowledge from the top down, that we kind of have built all our classrooms to look like and that we build conference halls and theaters to look like. They have more of a democratic, egalitarian kind of a feel. If you wish, treat it as if it's a conference presentation in the way that we've talked about today, but you can also use it as an opportunity for more exploratory sort of work.

You still want to prepare. You can certainly do it as a regular presentation, but often a roundtable presentation could be for ideas that are sort of in formation, that you are soliciting feedback on some ideas with some preliminary sort of research that you've done. They are similar in many respects but they're different because there's a feeling of informality. The nice thing about roundtables too is that they can be kind of a gateway drug. You'll get yourself onto a roundtable if you're not yet prepared to go the full hog and do a presentation in front of an audience, like a regular style presentation.

Once nice thing that can happen is that randomly a senior scholar happens to sit at the table, and people's guards are down a little bit more. There's a more social feel immediately at a roundtable presentation between the audience the presenter because you're literally sitting next to somebody who's the audience. The person on your right is an audience member, and you're talking to them. So that slightly more informal sort of feel, I think, can make it less nerve wracking. But there's no replacement for preparing. You can still have your script, and you might go off script, but it's good to prepare.

**Question 4** – How do you suggest coordinating presentations if there are multiple presenters on the same paper?

**Answer** – That's a great question. That's a hard one. I've co-authored presentations a few times. And I would say the same thing, it's about preparation, but it's also about a very clear division of the presentation. It's a very clear division of labour within the presentation. Say faculty and student co-author a paper, the student might do the whole presentation, or vice

versa. This can be the opportunity for a student to present work that a faculty member has sort of vetted and been part of.

There's a real art to coordinate a presentation with somebody, to go back and forth. And you see people do them. When they're done well, they're amazing, they're seamless. I think they take a little more practice. You can't just say by email, "Okay, I'll do slides two to five." You need to work on your segues and how you move from one to the other. And you want it to be somebody you have a good working relationship with. It's okay too for one person to present a paper that's written by 2, 3, 4, 5 people. It's nice if the other people are in the audience, they can address questions if somebody did the interviews and somebody else coded them. The person who did the interviews might be in the audience and answer some questions that come up in the Q&A.

There's no magic formula, but definitely preparing a very clear division of labour and knowing where you're going to change off. It's very easy to run out of time. I have seen presentations, where one of the presenters, often the more senior person, goes on for too long, and they eat into the time of the person who's a first timer. I think it's important to kind of coordinate all that.

**Question 4** – I've been asked in the past for my card, and I don't have one. Should grad students make business cards or contact cards?

**Answer** – Good question. The card is kind of disappearing, I guess. It's funny. I think there are disciplines and types of conferences where those circulate a lot more. They're pretty cheap. You don't have to have one. I mean, most people can make contact very easily, because we're all carrying around devices with us that make it quite easy to immediately connect with somebody. I would say there is no hard and fast rule. But you know if you have a design sensibility, if you'd like to have one, by all means. But I wouldn't say it's an absolute necessity at sociology conferences. I find at international conferences it tends to happen a lot more. Scholars from certain parts of the world have them more often. At the ISA and some of the eastern conferences, a lot of Japanese and Chinese scholars seem to often have cards. In different parts of the world and in different disciplines, there are more kind of norms around carrying cards. But I don't think it's currently something that sociologists in Canada do.

**Question 5** – How important are the formal parts of conferences for networking versus informal? And can you speak more about research clusters?

**Answer** – Things like the speed meeting, I guess it's formal in the sense that it's set up and organized by the Association, but really how it rolls out is very informal. People are just chatting and sharing. "Hey, what do you do?" But a really good way just to develop networks is the research clusters that have emerged in the CSA over the last few years. They've been really great. People show up and you're like, "Oh, that's the person that wrote

that paper ...,” Or, “Hey, I’ve heard that person is working on this issue.” And they might be there.

The meetings themselves, they vary radically from cluster to cluster, I think. But they are an opportunity for a formal type of network that ends up bleeding into being semi-formal, informal, if you like. I think in a really instrumental kind of sense, or in a kind of a career advancement sense, the best way that networks were developed or opened up for me was when somebody senior than me, an advisor, or somebody who’s a grad student and they’ve just got a job somewhere, where they introduce somebody. That tends to have positive outcomes in an instrumental sense.

In the more informal sort of stuff, I think the meet and greets that happen within clusters, or ASA has different departments hold different receptions, and things like that. They have free food usually, so the standing around part, often, you end up in casual and easy conversation with people that sometimes leads to a kind of a long-term collegial relationship with somebody or, or a friendship.

There’s no Golden Rule of where to focus your energy, but if you’re going to a conference, it’s better to involve yourself in more of it than less of it. Try and attend things that bring you out of your comfort zone a little bit. Attend receptions and things. Sometimes it’s terrifying but generally people at sociology conferences in general are positive, collegial, friendly. All those receptions are super awkward, right? They’re kind of awkward for everyone except people who everyone knows. They’re very awkward so having a grad school colleague or peer with you or a faculty member from your department, if you recognize someone in the room who you already know, it’s good to even just hang out with them, and then casually kind of conversations can kind of happen.

**Question 6** – How do the research clusters in the CSA function? What can I expect if I join one? How can we get the most out of these clusters?”

**Answer** – To join a research clusters, you just say, “Hey, I want to join the research cluster.” You could email cluster chairs. By virtue of being a member of the CSA, you can join any of the research clusters. They have a structure that sort of emerged within our annual Conference, they’re kind of streams.

Sherry and the program committee goes to great lengths to organize it so that the four theory sessions for example, are all in a row, preferably in the same room. Or they’re either all on the same day, or they’re kind of clustered together in time and space, so that people can have sustained interactions with one another in those spaces. And that’s good. It also means that you might end up not running into other people as much from other clusters and stuff. But I think it’s been a positive for people developing kind of a sense of being part of a cohesive subfield within the discipline leading to more conversations happening.

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It's kind of a low-hanging fruit. There's no great expectation, but if you go to the research cluster meetings when they happen, you get a sense of who's involved. And I get the sense with many of the clusters there's ample opportunities for involvement in various kinds of ways. Clusters need chairs, clusters collaborate in different sorts of ways around how to organize sessions that might fall into their purview. They propose sessions, they propose panels. So, there's relatively low barriers to entry to get involved with research clusters and it's a good way for you to get a sense of who else is working in the fields that are of interest to you.

**[SLIDE 35]**

**Awish:**

Thank you everyone for attending and thank you, Mervyn, for your presentation and for answering all of our questions!

A recording of the webinar will be posted online on the Students@CSA page. Audience members will also be receiving a feedback survey from us, so we'd appreciate if you could fill that out. Before you go, we would also like to let everyone know that we're going to have some additional webinars scheduled for May and June. And we'll be sending everyone on our mailing list some more information about those soon. Thank you everyone for joining us today and enjoy the rest of your day.