Conferences as Environments for Processing Ideas: A Comparison of Contrasting Formats within Anthropology

Alan Howard and Alexander Mawyer

A considerable portion of scholarly lives is bound up with meetings of various kinds. For those located within academic institutions, office hours, departmental meetings, and university committees play a range of roles in the ebb and flow of day-to-day activities and the career trajectories of *Homo Academicus* (Bourdieu 1988). Of particular significance for academic disciplines are conferences that bring together scholars from multiple institutions for the purpose of sharing knowledge and exploring new directions in methodologies and the interpretation of salient ideas. We organize our calendars around the periodicities of such gatherings, maintain or transform relations with old professors and former students within them, and through them forge new relationships with colleagues whose work may somehow support our own efforts.

Somewhat beyond their social and political functions, like publications that circulate within scholarly communities, academic conferences are a key venue in which ideas are contested. However, unlike contests regarding the credibility and status of facts (Latour and Woolgar [1979] 2013) and "tribunals of reason" (Latour 1987) that play out in peer-reviewed academic literature, the dynamics that characterize scholarly conferences have received relatively scant attention regarding their role in the formulation, maintenance, and transformation of the disciplines involved.

In this article, we query the role that conference procedures play in shaping the processing of ideas within the discipline of anthropology. By "ideas," we are referring to the conceptualization of issues, the kinds of data that are appropriate for addressing them, the language in which they are couched, their theoretical implications, and the methodological interventions necessary to pursue

them, which together compose research paradigms for particular disciplines. Our concern is whether different organizational contexts play a role in shaping the processing of ideas among members of a discipline in conference settings.

In the opening lines of her influential work *Epistemic Cultures*, Knorr Cetina offers a working definition of epistemic cultures: "those amalgams of arrangements and mechanisms—bonded through affinity, necessity, and historical coincidence—which, in a given field, make up how we know what we know. Epistemic cultures are cultures that create and warrant knowledge" (1999:1). In this work and elsewhere, Knorr Cetina draws into view the need for attention "to the differences in procedure which we find in different fields' organization of openness and knowledge-grounding" which "may point to the possibility of different relationships between these sciences' products and the world, and to differences in the functioning of theories in different areas" (1991a:120). In the case of the epistemic communities constituted by anthropology and its subdisciplines, it seems relatively unproblematic to assert that they can be identified as maintaining a "richly textured internal environment and culture" (Knorr Cetina 1991a:120).[1]

Since the emergence of a sociology of knowledge, notably energized in the wake of, and sometimes in critical response to, Latour and Woolgar ([1979] 2013) and Latour (1987) as well as Knorr Cetina (1991a, 1991b, 1999), Haraway (1988), and others, some aspects of these "richly textured environments" have received attention, for instance in the functioning of natural scientists' laboratories and the "construction and dismantling of facts in conversation" (Latour and Woolgar [1979] 2013:154–167). The critical role of writing, publishing, circulating, and reading within epistemic communities, to use Knorr Cetina's framing, has also been a center point of this work (Latour and Woolgar [1979] 2013:201, 225; Latour 1987:21–67; Hyland 1999), as has the culture of status of various universities and programs, and the career trajectories of

individuals moving within and between them (Wacquant 1989; Kawa et al. 2018). While there are numerous ways to inquire into the constitutions, functions, and dynamics of anthropology's epistemic communities (or, if one does not take the discipline to be singular, the various epistemic communities constituted by its subdisciplines), we are particularly interested in the long-term dynamics of scholarly conferences that are, after all, concrete and material institutions that reproduce themselves over time and exert some degree of agency over the social and intellectual lives of participants (Hughes 1936; Parsons 1990). We also recognize that conferences often have the quality of obligatory celebrations of a discipline's raison d'être, while implicitly or explicitly reaffirming the particular forms of their governance.

The Role of Conferences in the Production of Knowledge

Just about every professional organization and academic discipline holds conferences at regular intervals as a way of bringing together their members for the avowed purpose of sharing information and ideas in face-to-face venues. The Internet is replete with blogs and postings listing the advantages of participating in conferences, including finding out what's new in one's field of interest; socializing and networking with potential future collaborators; getting one's name known, which can have implications for employment and other professional opportunities; obtaining firsthand feedback on one's projects; learning about increased possibilities for publication; traveling to interesting venues; and, for academic scholars, establishing evidence of national or international reach and engagement, which may be significant when universities evaluate personnel for tenure and/or promotion. However, the reasons for attending conferences are presumably essentially driven by intellectual pursuits within particular communities of knowledge producers.

Strikingly, for all the attention given to conferences as significant career venues, relatively little research has been done regarding the nature of conferences as social and cultural institutions for sharing knowledge, including the ways in which they are structured, their cultural environments, and how these characteristics of conferences affect the development of ideas within scholarly communities. Nevertheless, some scholars have offered opinions about the value of conferences, or the lack of it, for disciplinary advancement. For instance, within our field, Canadian anthropologist Philip Carl Salzman opines that "a well-known and occasionally discussed problem is the fact that the vast multitude of anthropological conferences, congresses, articles, monographs, and collections, while adding up to mountains of paper . . . do not seem to add up to a substantial, integrated, coherent body of knowledge that could provide a base for the further advancement of the discipline" (Salzman quoted in Borofsky 2019:45; cf. Borofsky 1994).

In contrast to Salzman, we are less dismissive of the contributions of conferences to the maintenance or promotion of disciplinary projects and suggest that constructive disciplinary work plays out through conference participation by scholars within particular epistemic communities. Annual conferences of professional organizations clearly perform some important work for their disciplines, including (1) establishing specific epistemic communities; (2) maintaining and reproducing those communities over time; (3) establishing normative epistemic, methodological, ontological, and ethical commitments and practices within those communities; (4) playing a significant role in mediating, remediating, and developing those norms over time; and (5) acting as an ecological setting in which specific disciplinary/epistemic community-producing ideas emerge, persist, are transformed, or perish over various periodicities and over the *longue durée*.

However, as Judith Mair points out in her 2013 book on conferences and conventions, although various aspects of such meetings have made great strides since they have appeared as a research topic in the 1980s, "there are still many areas where our knowledge is relatively scant—examples include a deeper understanding of the benefits for delegates of attending conferences" (2013:1). Although Mair's book is largely concerned with the economic aspects of conferences and conventions, in her concluding chapter she outlines a research agenda that includes "a better understanding of the value of conference and convention networking, as well as more in-depth knowledge of the positive psychological outcomes of conference and convention attendance" (2013:124), which move beyond the psychological and career pragmatic toward issues of knowledge production and circulation. As examples, she poses the following questions:

- Can the discussion of a shared topic of interest at a conference or convention lead to new ways of thinking about problems or issues? If so, by what mechanism(s) does this occur?
- Can conference and convention attendance play a role in building self-esteem, and act as a motivational trigger for delegates to further their career?
- Is conference and convention attendance linked to improved enthusiasm and creativity at work? If so, how can this be maximised? (Mair 2013:124).

Mair importantly calls some critical directions for better understanding the role of conferences in shaping the directions of disciplines and the experiences of attendees. Inspired by her critique, in this article we are concerned with what we

are calling "the ecology of ideas" that are constituted by annual meetings of specific professional organizations, as described above.

Although we have not done the kind of longitudinal research suggested by Mair, we are writing in the wake of a multiyear project on the history of one association with which we have been intimately involved,[2] the Association for Social Anthropology of Oceania (ASAO). As our contribution to a working group concerned with the association's history, we developed a database of sessions, presentations, and subsequent publications coming out of fifty-plus years of that association's annual conference meetings. We identified a number of significant points bearing on the formation of a distinctive cultural environment that affected, and continues to affect, the processing of information and ideas, including the organization's founding charter, which favored a comparative framework that lent priority to processing ethnographic data rather than theoretical abstractions. The resultant framework encouraged collegial engagement in pursuit of common goals, and a governance that permitted a considerable degree of freedom for the rank and file to shape the intellectual agenda, including the topics and frameworks for the discussion and analysis of ethnographic data. This included an allowance for any member to propose and organize a session on a topic of interest without interference from a governing body, in contrast to meetings at which an organizing "elite" creates specific themes for conferences, and/or establish criteria for inclusion or exclusion of topics. Our work on ASAO's history convinced us that the degree of governance hierarchy and/or its relative absence plays a significant role in the agency of working anthropologists to guide the discipline's "conversation" over the years, and that the degree of organizational hierarchy is a primary driver for the way that ideas are treated over time.

In the following sections we describe the associational and organizational norms that govern the annual meetings of the ASAO as contrasted with those of another, much larger anthropology organization before turning to a reflective

analysis of the role of these norms in shaping the ecology of ideas for practitioners and participants within these two associations.

The Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania

The structure of ASAO annual meetings contrasts with more conventional scholarly gatherings such as the American Anthropological Association (AAA) meetings in significant ways, especially in its emphasis on discussion as opposed to formal paper presentations. We do not mean to suggest that ASAO is unique in this regard, but we believe that ASAO meetings have some unique features that are worthy of consideration for the way they provide a particularly productive ecology of ideas. We also think it is enlightening to understand how these features evolved from the premises on which the organization was founded, so we provide an historical overview of that evolution.

Although ASAO business matters and policy decisions are in the hands of a board of directors, members of the board play no role in determining the content of sessions at annual meetings or the dynamic development and evolution of sessions over time. Any member can organize a session on a topic of interest to them and can be assured of a place on the program provided they can get enough interested parties to participate. The overview provided to organizers on the ASAO website reads as follows:

> ASAO is characterized by social informality and collegial cooperation regardless of rank. At the same time, the rigorous examination of data and ideas in ASAO sessions is designed to lead to high quality, often publishable sets of comparative papers on topics of importance in Pacific anthropology.

> The format of ASAO sessions differs from those at many scholarly meetings where individual papers are presented. Instead, ASAO sessions feature the ongoing give-and-take required for penetrating intellectual examination of difficult, yet vital, issues. ASAO sessions are of three types: Informal Sessions, Working Sessions, and Symposia.
>
> Please note, however, that these session types are meant to serve as guidelines. Sessions do not need to follow a 3-year timeline (i.e. Informal to Working to Symposia). Rather, session organizers are invited to determine the session type and timeline that best suits their session's needs.[3]

Informal sessions can be proposed well before the meeting date allowing for the announcement in the ASAO newsletter and on the organization's website, which allows for interested members to commit in advance to going to such sessions, or they can be proposed at the welcoming plenary session at the beginning of the meeting. There are no minimum requirements for attendance at informal sessions and everything is done to accommodate them in terms of an allotted time and meeting space, which is in the hands of the program coordinator, who is one of several "officers" of the organization. The amount of time allotted for informal session generally varies depending on the number of committed participants or attendees expressing an interest in the topic proposed. Provided there is sufficient interest, the organizer (or co-organizers, as is often the case) may decide to schedule a working session during the following year's meeting.

The posted guidelines for working sessions reads as follows:

> WORKING SESSIONS are based on prepared papers that are briefly summarized (NOT READ) during the session. Abstracts, if not drafts of papers, must be precirculated among session organizers and participants. Most of the meeting time during the session is allocated for discussing common themes, with an eye toward finding coherence and preparing for a second round of writing.
>
> Session organizers can be imaginative in how they organize Working Sessions. Participants should respond to and make constructive suggestions on each other's papers. If complete drafts are precirculated, some organizers assign people to read particular papers and prepare commentary ahead of time; some have participants present each other's papers, allowing the authors time afterward to clarify points and respond to questions. One or more invited discussants can be helpful at this stage, but again, only if complete drafts of papers are circulated in advance.
>
> Working Sessions form the heart of ASAO meetings and require considerable time for the discussion of provocative ideas, the analysis of different approaches, and the search for core themes. Accordingly, Working Sessions are ordinarily given first priority when meeting time and space are allocated. Time will be allocated according to the number of participants attending and presenting papers.
>
> A minimum of seven participants presenting papers in person at the meeting is required for Working Session status.

And for symposia the posted guidelines read:

> SYMPOSIA are sessions that normally have met at a lower level of organization at least once before. Papers must be precirculated among the session organizers, participants, and any invited discussants. Contributors do not read their papers but discuss the key issues that arise from them. Conversation in the session focuses on those issues and provides a constructive critique that contributes to building a coherent set of papers or book chapters.
>
> Time should be set aside during the Symposium to discuss whether and how to pursue publication. Options include the ASAO Monograph Series (which has an informal right of first refusal for volumes arising from ASAO sessions) or other academic publishers; a special issue of an appropriate journal; or separate publication of individual papers.
>
> Some Symposia may require only an hour and a half to wrap up unfinished business, while others may need as much as six hours to discuss issues, themes, and future plans. Symposium organizers should advise the Program Coordinator of their time requirements.
>
> The presence of seven participants with precirculated papers is required for full Symposium status.

Attendees are urged to stay with one session from beginning to end rather than to go from session to session to hear particular papers or speakers (made difficult because individual time slots are not formally allocated, although sequences of speakers may be specified by session organizers). Besides, papers are not read.

The format allows, even encourages, attendees of sessions who are not formal participants to engage in discussions if they feel they have something to contribute.

As a consequence of the absence of hierarchy, the social atmosphere at meetings is inclusive and welcoming. Graduate students just back from the field can propose sessions along with the most accomplished scholars, and because participants are there as ethnographers with information to share about the particular cultures they have studied, everyone is seen as an equally worthwhile contributor. This contrasts with AAA meetings where theoretical and methodological innovations are prized, with ethnography primarily in the role of illustration. Social interactions at coffee breaks and meals at ASAO meetings are more often than not guided by common interest in session topics.

A Brief History of the Birth and Evolution of ASAO

The idea for an organization that would take advantage of opportunities presented by the Pacific Islands for comparative research was the brainchild of Vern Carroll, a student of David Schneider's at the University of Chicago. Carroll had done extensive fieldwork on Nukuoro Atoll, a Polynesian outlier in Micronesia, and he was enamored with the possibilities for controlled comparison within Polynesia and Micronesia. The idea for such research, and publications based on it, had precedents in British social anthropology (*African Political Systems* [see Radcliff-Brown 1940], and *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage* [Radcliffe-Brown and Forde 1950]) and Marshall Sahlins's publication of *Social Stratification in Polynesia* (1958).

To initiate his vision, Carroll, in conjunction with Roger Keesing, organized a "symposium" in 1967 at Keesing's home institution, the University of California–Santa Cruz. The sole topic of the meeting was adoption in Eastern Pacific societies (Island Melanesia was included as a concession to Keesing, who

contributed a paper on adoption among the Kwaio in Malaita, Solomon Islands). The focus on adoption was the product of the cynosure of kinship studies in social and cultural anthropology at the time. Within kinship studies, anthropologists were interested in adoption in relation to the transmission of rights in land and other forms of property. A selection of the papers was published in a volume entitled *Adoption in Eastern Oceania* edited by Carroll (1970).

Discussions at the Santa Cruz symposium led Carroll to propose the formation of an Association for Social Anthropology in Eastern Oceania (ASAEO). In its initial newsletter (May 15, 1967),[4] he provided the rationale for the organization:

> One major conclusion reached at the symposium was that the intensification of modern social anthropology research in the Pacific has not so far been sufficiently systematic: we have gone out as individuals or in small team projects, largely out of touch with our col1eagues, and have pursued diverse research interests and published the results in scattered bits and pieces. Organized comparative studies like those on politics and kinship that brought African social anthropology into focus have so far been lacking.
>
> What, then, to do about it? We decided to form this association, as a means of organizing research, disseminating information, and arranging recurring symposia on topics in Oceanic social anthropology. (*ASAEO Newsletter* 1:1)

As explained in the August 15, 1968, issue of the newsletter, meetings would consist of one or more symposia with the goal of publishing in an ASAEO series. The call was for plenty of discussion, since:

> Experience of several meetings of Pacific anthropologists at Santa Cruz suggests that we learn more about each other's ideas, data, and plans in such informal bull sessions than in a year or two of exchanging letters and publications. (*ASAEO Newsletter* 3:2)

In a subsequent newsletter published just prior to the first annual meeting of the organization, which had by then assumed its current name (ASAO),[5] two items in a Q & A section are particularly relevant to meeting formats:

> Q. What are the implications of the word "social" in the title [of the organization]?
> A. We are an organization of ethnographers with regional comparative interests. [emphasis in the original]
>
> Q. What sort of "Annual Meeting" does ASAO hold?
> A. Our aim is to have meetings that are (1) relaxing; (2) good opportunities to get to know each other better; and (3) intellectually profitable, hopefully with some measurable output. Thus we aim to have three-day meetings in quiet, scenic surroundings (away from large cities) with two full days devoted to each symposium. There will be a limited number of symposia (e.g., four). Discussions at these symposia will center around previously circulated position papers and will represent one stage of monograph preparation.. (*ASAO Newsletter* 9:6, 8 [Winter 1972])

The first official annual meeting of ASAO was held from March 29 to April 1, 1972, at Rosario's Resort-Hotel on Orcas Island in the San Juan Group in Washington State. It was attended by some fifty anthropologists who participated

in two formal symposia at which previously circulated papers were discussed, and a "symposium" in which no formal papers were given and "sessions served to define certain problems which will provide the basis for papers and a formal symposium for next spring's meeting" (*ASAO Newsletter* 10:9 [Spring 1972]). In addition to the three symposia, informal discussions were held in the evenings on four additional topics (*ASAO Newsletter* 10:10). The following year's meeting was also held at Rosario's Resort, with more than sixty in attendance. It included two symposia, two "working sessions," and an informal evening "discussion session" concerning indigenous reactions to anthropological research (*ASAO Newsletter* 12:1–5 [Spring 1973]).

A stock-taking of the first two meetings of the association resulted in a restructuring of the conference format for the 1974 meeting. The problem was that in trying to avoid scheduling conflicts so that no one would be in a position of wanting to attend two sessions meeting at the same time, it was necessary to schedule symposia that separated sessions that should have been contiguous, allowing insufficient time for symposium contributors "to work out formatting of their symposium volumes." The solution was to propose the three classes of sessions: symposia, working sessions, and, informal sessions (*ASAO Newsletter* 12:11–12 [Spring 1973]).

The emergence of the three types of session co-occurred with the start of what became ASAO's iconic "three-year cycle" of developmental sessions. This multistage development of topical sessions and ideas was very much about "learning to talk to one another" over multiyear conversations (early and longtime ASAO member Michael Lieber, personal communication, March 2015). Although Carroll later expressed misgivings about the new structure (*ASAO Newsletter* 50:2–3 [Spring 1984]), the evolution of session formats can be seen as the result of his initial organizational scheme, which placed power in the hands of session organizers. Topics were not selected by the ASAO Board of Directors or officers;

rather, it was very much a grassroots matter of someone with a keen interest in a topic proposing it and taking responsibility for guiding the development of the "long conversation" (as another early and longtime member, David Counts, called the three-year cycle [personal communication, December 2015]).

Annual ASAO membership figures average around 300, with perhaps 150–225 people (mostly members) attending annual meetings; over the past ten years, there have been between 14 and 29 sessions scheduled at each meeting. To better appreciate the dynamics of the ASAO, we suggest that it is useful to contrast this conference with a more traditional conference cultural environment such as that long established at the center of American anthropology by the annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association (AAA).

The American Anthropological Association

The American Anthropological Association was founded in 1902 "to promote the science of anthropology, to stimulate and coordinate the efforts of American anthropologists, to foster local and other societies devoted to anthropology, to serve as a bond among American anthropologists and anthropologic[al] organizations present and prospective, and to publish and encourage the publication of matter pertaining to anthropology" (AAA Articles of Incorporation). All four main fields of anthropology—cultural anthropology, biological/physical anthropology, archaeology, and linguistic anthropology—are included. From an initial membership of 175, the association grew slowly during the first half of the twentieth century, but since 1950 its membership has increased to over 10,000. AAA is organized into forty sections, each reflecting specialized areas within anthropology.

The annual meetings of AAA are huge events, with more than 6,000 attendees in recent years. Given the number of participants and the range of their professional backgrounds, it is not surprising that the association provides a wide

range of formats for participants to make presentations, including volunteered papers, poster galleries, installations, roundtables, group flash presentations, and workshops, among others.

The options for individuals are volunteered papers, poster presentations, or "installations." Individually volunteered papers are presented within lecture-based panels of 4–7 presenters put together by section program chairs into "cohesive" sessions. Sessions are restricted to 105 minutes, with each participant allotted no more than 15 minutes. Individual poster galleries allow for an individual's work to be displayed via a poster format in sessions lasting 120 minutes. Installations "invite anthropological knowledge off the beaten path of the written conference paper. Like work shared in art venues, presentations selected as part of the AAA Installations program . . . draw upon and engage meeting attendees in a diverse world of the senses. Participants may propose performances, recitals, conversations, author-meets-critic roundtables, salon reading workshops, oral history recording sessions, and another alternative, creative forms of intellectual expression for consideration."[6] Installation sessions can be of variable length and may include anywhere from 1–32 participants who may take anywhere from 1–30 minutes for their presentations.

In addition to individual submissions are group options, including pre-formed oral presentation panels; retrospective oral presentation sessions that are intended to highlight career contributions of established leading scholars; roundtable discussion-based panels; group flash presentation sessions, which are described as "rapid-fire, engaging performance[s] of dynamic spoken content delivered with a punch"; group gallery (curated poster) sessions, "composed of 2–30 presenters wishing to display their work in posters or related modes of visual content display; and workshops."

Pre-formed oral presentation panels and retrospective oral presentation sessions are both structured like sessions composed of individually volunteered

papers in so far as they are limited to seven participants (although there may be as few as four) in 15-minute timeslots for paper presentations and/or discussants. Roundtable sessions and retrospective roundtable discussions are allocated 105 minutes for 6–13 participants, with a limit of seven presenters. Neither papers nor submitted abstracts are a requirement for participation. Group flash presentation sessions may include 7–20 participants, including 5–15 flash presenters with limits of five minutes and twenty slides per presenter. Group gallery poster sessions are curated galleries composed of 2–30 presenters wishing to display their work in posters or related modes of visual content display in a time frame of 105 minutes.

Workshops are offered in 2-, 4-, or 8-hour time slots and can be submitted in up to 4 pre-determined tracks:

1. Academic Career Development – job search, promotion and tenure, writing and publishing for scholarly journals, turning the dissertation into a book manuscript, teaching skills, grant and contract proposal writing skills, media training
2. Practicing / Applied Career Development – job search, world of consulting, includes private, non-profit/non-governmental organization, and government sectors, project management skills, grant and contract proposal writing skills, media training, museum exhibit planning
3. Humanistic Anthropology – poetry, creative writing, autoethnographic styles
4. Technical Skill Development – includes Quantitative, Qualitative, Visual (Photo and Video) Data Collection, Analysis and Production Methods, GIS, Social Network Analysis

In workshops, AAA allows 2–9 participants, of which 1–7 may be presenters and 1–2 organizers.

Given the size of the membership and the number of individuals attending annual meetings, along with time constraints, it would not be practical to accommodate all the potential submissions at any given conference. Therefore, AAA has instituted a formal procedure for reviewing proposals by a committee composed of section program reviewers, executive program committee members, the executive program chair, and officers of the AAA.

Organizers and presenters are required to select a primary review section when submitting proposals online. The decision is supposed to be made on the basis of content and intended audience. Scholarly sessions and individually volunteered papers and posters are reviewed by section program reviewers, who are individuals nominated by each section of the AAA. The recommendations of these sections are forwarded to the executive program chair, who assumes final responsibility for the acceptance or rejection of proposals. The executive program committee prepares the final program schedule following the rankings submitted by each section. All final program notifications about acceptance and scheduling are mailed by the executive program chair via email. The specifics of the review process are posted on the AAA Website:[7]

> The review process consists of three (3) review "rounds," all of which are detailed below.
>
> • Review round 1: RELEVANCE
>
> During this round, section program chairs skim proposals (directed to his/her section) and determine relevance to the section with a yes/no decision.

- Review round 2A: Assign INVITED or COSPONSORED status

  During this round (which runs simultaneously with 2B), section program chairs work within their sections and with other section program chairs to decide which fully-submitted panels should receive invited or cosponsored designations.

  - Sessions granted Invited and Cosponsored designations do not undergo further review, and are guaranteed primary placement on the final program.

- Review round 2B: BUILD SESSIONS from Individually Volunteered Paper submissions

  During this review round (which runs simultaneously with 2A), section program chairs review individually-volunteered paper submissions directed to his/her section and form them into panels of four (4) to seven (7) paper presenters.

  - These "newly-created sessions" will be reviewed and evaluated in the next and final review round.
  - Section program chairs also have the ability to request that AAA extend individual gallery (poster) invitations to individually volunteered paper submissions.

- Review round 3: REVIEW and EVALUATE Submitted and Newly-Created Sessions

  During this review round, section program chairs use review criteria to evaluate submissions that are not granted Invited or Cosponsored status, as well as the sessions the primary chairs have created from the individually volunteered paper submissions.

Evaluation criteria:

Using a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high), each reviewer will evaluate each submission based upon four (4) weighted criteria:

- Rate the rigor of scholarship in this submission (25%)
- Rate the relevance of this submission to critical issues within the discipline (25%)
- Rate the importance of this submission to current issues of broad concern (15%)
- Rate the quality of the submission overall (35%)

After all three of the review rounds have been completed, the decisions from all three rounds are compiled by the AAA Meetings Department in preparation for the scheduling phase.

Per the AAA Annual Meeting/Abstracts FAQs webpage: "To submit a session you will need the title of your session, estimated attendance, session abstract, keywords, names and role of all your participants. All session submissions are restricted to 1 hour and 45 minutes or 105 minutes." If a submission is not accepted, the decision is final; there is no appeal process.[8]

The review procedures underscore the hierarchical nature of AAA in which executive officers are directly involved in deciding, from submitted abstracts, what are worthwhile topics for inclusion and how presentations should be grouped. A sense of hierarchy is present even in informal social encounters in the form of differential prestige, with well-known senior scholars at the top of the hierarchy and emerging scholars given less recognition. Indeed, for graduate students and early career scholars with relatively few publications, AAA

conferences can be quite daunting, resulting in feelings of insecurity and isolation (a judgment based on personal experience and reports from other colleagues).

Once formed, a schedule of all events, including specified time slots for each presentation, is distributed. Members attending the AAA annual meeting thus can make plans to attend a number of different sessions held contemporaneously in order to listen to specific papers or scholars. This encourages a form of session hopping, with inflows and outflows of audience members during most sessions. As a result, sessions with well-known scholars presenting on currently fashionable topics tend to draw large audiences, and their ideas thus also receive the lion's share of attention, visibility, and consequently enjoy increased likelihood of influence in the collective conversation. Lesser-known scholars, including graduate students, frequently lose audiences even before they are able to deliver their presentations and, as a result, their ideas gain less exposure and are subjected to fewer critiques in discussion. Indeed, time for discussion is extremely limited under the best of conditions and thus, to a considerable extent as far as the formal aspects of the meeting is concerned, attendees are reduced to the role of audience for the great majority of the time.

While the governing structures of both the ASAO and AAA are clearly efficacious in producing meetings that have attracted participants and audiences over decades, their governance and the resulting practical organization of their meetings can be queried as to whether the epistemic communities that they produce, reproduce, and maintain, differ in how they nurture particular ecologies of ideas. In the next section, we reflect on role of these differing ecologies on the development of paradigmatic, normative approaches to the phenomena of shared concern within these specific epistemic communities, themselves embedded within the broader shared discipline of anthropology.

The Ecology of Ideas

Compelling critiques of conferences have come from the constructivist and cybernetic perspectives (more specifically, second-order cybernetics), which have both drawn from and been influential in anthropology. Both of these discourses adhere to an epistemological premise that scientific knowledge is constructed by communities of scientists as a result of discussion, negotiation, and contestation in the production of knowledge and in its circulation via peer reviewed literature (Latour 1987). In the social sciences, constructivism as an epistemology urges researchers to reflect on the paradigms underpinning their research, and to be open to considering multiple ways of interpreting research results. The focus should be on presenting results as negotiable constructs rather than as models that aim to represent social realities more or less accurately (Rouse 1993; Galison and Stump 1996).

Second-order cybernetics, also known as the cybernetics of cybernetics, was developed by Margaret Mead, Heinz von Foerster, and Gordon Pask, among others, in the late 1960s and mid 1970s. In her 1967 keynote address to the inaugural meeting of the American Society for Cybernetics (ASC), Mead characterized "cybernetics as a way of looking at things and as a language for expressing what one sees" (1968). She proposed that ASC should organize itself in the light of the ideas with which it was concerned—that the practice of cybernetics by the ASC should be subject to cybernetic critique. In his coedited book *Cybernetics of Cybernetics,* published in 1974, von Foerster defines the cybernetics of cybernetics as "the control of control and the communication of communication"; in another work he differentiates first-order cybernetics as "the cybernetics of observed systems" and second-order cybernetics as "the cybernetics of observing systems" (von Foerster 2003). Gordon Pask proposes conversation theory as a cybernetic and dialectic framework that offers a theory to explain how interactions lead to "construction of knowledge" or "knowing."

Conversation theory regards social systems as symbolic, language-oriented systems in which meanings are agreed on through conversations (Pask 1970, 1979). The implication of this epistemological stance for conferences is that discussion, and lots of it, is vital to the nurturance of ideas and the advancement of "knowing."

In their introduction to a special issue of the journal *Constructivist Foundations*, entitled *Exploring Alternatives to the Traditional Conference Format,* Sweeting and Hohl (2015) critique the format of conferences such as AAA's from a constructivist perspective in some detail. They observe that although the traditional format for conferences, established by the Royal Society of London in the 1600s, involved the reading of papers accompanied by active participation and an exchange of knowledge, contemporary conferences have become much more passive.

While acknowledging that the traditional paper presentation model offers some benefits, such as predictability, which facilitates advanced planning, and the possibility for young scholars to introduce themselves by presenting the results of their research relatively quickly, Sweeting and Hohl, drawing on the criticisms of second-order cyberneticians and constructivists such as Glanville (2011) and Pask (1979), summarize the many practical shortcomings of traditional conference design, including the following:

- The conference timetable is tightly constrained and there is little room for flexibility or improvisation in response to questions raised.
- Discussions are minimised and formalised, meaning that the most significant moments of exchange are often squeezed into the margins.

- The formality of presentation, and the necessity to often submit papers to proceedings in advance (so that they are more like "precedings" than proceedings), means that much of the opportunity to learn from feedback on the paper during the presentation is missed.
- Papers are often presented in parallel sessions, meaning that each participant misses more than they attend, with little opportunity to communicate between sessions. Some participants do little more than attend the session in which they present. . . .
- The predominantly one-way and predetermined format of the paper presentation is in contrast with constructivist approaches in other contexts, such as education, which are oriented towards an environment conducive to conversation (Glasersfeld 1992).
- The possibilities for exchange and collaboration between participants and also between disciplines are obstructed by minimising the sort of conversations that help each to learn about and from the other.
- The traditional conference reports findings that are not questionable and so does not, in itself, move the subject forward. It is not about learning or exploring but reporting on research already conducted and affirming already established knowledge. (Sweeting and Hohl 2015:2)

They go on to ask the key questions:

> Understanding a conference in constructivist terms invites us to understand it as an active part of research and to consider formats that help us in doing so. How might, for instance, we compose a conference in such a way that, in turn, it helps us in composing

> new ideas and research questions rather than in passively reporting on and listening to the results of research already conducted? In what ways can a format help interdisciplinary exchange between researchers or practitioners from different backgrounds, and how may exploratory conversations be central rather than peripheral to the programme? (Sweeting and Hohl 2015:3)

What can we make of the implications of constructivism and second-order cybernetics for understanding the relationships and dynamic outcomes of the particular conference culture or cultural environment of a meeting like the ASAO in contrast of that of the AAA? To begin with, it is clear to us that one might question whether the ASAO format, as a result of its more egalitarian structure, allows for greater flexibility in the processing of ideas. Indeed, some have questioned whether the three-year cycle may actually be too rigid for productive discussions to take place.

In the April 2000 Newsletter of the Association, Richard Feinberg, the program organizer at the time, addressed the concern some members and observers had expressed about the three-year cycle:

> Contrary to the impression shared by a number of participants, external observers, and even a few long-time members, a session is not required to proceed through a rigid three-year cycle, moving from an informal gathering to a working session and formal symposium before going to publication as an ASAO Monograph. While that is how the prototypical ASAO colloquium develops, it is not mandated by the association. The objective of ASAO meetings is not to have three-year sequences, nor is it necessarily publication of monographs. The objective is to have an

> intellectually stimulating experience from which participants benefit by improving their knowledge and understanding of important issues and establishing collaborative relationships with colleagues who share their interests.
>
> The conference format of most scholarly societies, where panelists meet, read papers, and promptly disband, is not conducive to the kind of intellectual development we seek. Historically, our members have found that the opportunity to explore a complex problem in depth over a number of years with the same group of people leads to a far more satisfying experience and tends to yield a more meaningful product. The "ASAO treatment" is what attracted many of us to the association and what keeps us coming back. But we should not confuse the means and the end. (*ASAO Newsletter* 106:5 [April 2000])

In fact our research into the history of ASAO sessions makes it clear that the "ideal" three-year cycle is far from a realized outcome, accounting for only 19 percent of the outcomes of initial informal sessions. The actual sequencing of sessions is much more fluid and suggestive of an intellectual dynamic that allows for constant refocusing of topics and multiple outcomes, depending on where participants take discussions and what outcomes they decide on. In other words, rather than adhering to a top-down prescriptive formula, the process is driven by session participants themselves as they pursue common interests.

It might be worth noting that the different session levels facilitate different types of discourse, with informal sessions providing a venue for a wide variety of theoretical viewpoints and forms of field data, while working sessions require sufficient field data to prepare draft papers, and symposia require a greater degree of cohesion if they are to result in publishable outcomes. Sometimes it is

necessary to repeat session levels to gain the degree of consensus or focus required to move up a level—hence our finding that informal and working sessions often are repeated before going on to the next level.

Another dynamic of the ASAO conferences as a particular ecology of ideas can be identified in the way that many of our own publications would never have occurred had not someone suggested a topic we had not thought about, but realizing that we had excellent ethnographic data on the topic in our fieldnotes, we joined what was often a multi-year conversation and proceeded to develop an article or book chapter in collaboration with others.

It is also noteworthy that many topics are abandoned following informal or working sessions, and that many symposia do not result in publications. This should not be regarded in any sense as symptomatic of failure, but rather as ASAO providing a venue that allows for ideas to be explored without restriction, and to sort out those that lend themselves to fruitful comparison from those that do not, thus serving ASAO's foundational principle of facilitating controlled comparison, while motivating a continuity of particularly fruitful discourses that often takes issues of concern in new directions.

Nevertheless, as one measure for the success of a conference, considered in and over time, and with an eye on how a conference promotes or does not promote epistemic community or communities, one might turn to the number, range, role, and kind of publications emerging from the conference in the peer-reviewed literature. In the case of the ASAO, the overall number of peer-reviewed publications stemming from ASAO sessions is testimony to the productivity of the conference format. They include 24 edited volumes in an ASAO-sponsored monograph series, 29 additional stand-alone volumes, and 35 special issues of journals.[9] But even this understates the fruition of ASAO sessions. In a 92-page document dated 2005, Feinberg et al. list several hundred articles and book chapters the resulted from ASAO sessions up to that time, and there have been

many more since—in effect an extremely high percentage of all ASAO participants works. While many of these were published as individual contributions in journals or as book chapters apart from formal ASAO publications, the ASAO process especially supports authors publishing their work in conversation with each other within edited volumes (through publishers such as ANU Press, Berghahn Press, and the University of Hawai‘i Press) and special issues of peer-reviewed journals (*The Contemporary Pacific, Ethos, Journal of the Polynesian Society, Oceania, Pacific Studies, and The AJA,* among others).

Conclusion

In conclusion, while we find the constructivist and cybernetic critiques of standard academic conferences, such as those of the American Anthropological Association, quite compelling insofar as they draw attention to the problematic nature of their formats vis-à-vis the production and evolution of new knowledge, it has not been our intention to denigrate the value of AAA annual meetings which are clearly also highly productive for individual scholars and the broader anthropological community. Rather, our analysis aims at drawing attention to the significance of hierarchy for setting the context in which ideas are processed as well as the tone of meetings. Whereas large associations such as AAA require hierarchy to maintain a semblance of order at conferences, smaller associations such as ASAO are able to thrive with an absence of hierarchy by reinforcing an egalitarian collegiality conducive to unfettered discussion. We propose that this difference in governance results in contrastive, distinct ecological contexts for the processing of ideas with potential implications for the direction of the discipline over time.

We do not think expressions of dissatisfaction or skepticism about the efficacy of large, hierarchical conferences such as that voiced by Salzmann should be dismissed as inconsequential. Rather, they can be viewed as symptoms of a

more significant dynamic—that the particular ecology of ideas fostered by that format is indicative of specific forms of knowledge production, the ways in which contests over knowledge is conducted, and the ways in which it is shared and circulated. The governance and organizational hierarchy of the AAA results in the ideas of certain key players being given currency. They are fronted, often pushed hard by their colleagues, and rendered especially impactful. Although alternative ideas may be circulating, they are more easily relegated to the periphery, or given serious attention only among smaller segments of the discipline's communities. This, we believe, has the result of reinforcing current paradigms at the expense of developing ideas that may be challenging to the status quo or of ignoring long-running conversations that may be out of intellectual fashion. The contrast is with small groups of scholars working in an egalitarian milieu on a topic of common interest on an ongoing basis, which we believe is a particularly productive way to make significant progress in developing worthwhile ideas. Rather than rewarding displays of one-upmanship or competitive confrontations, the ASAO format provides an intellectual environment that fosters ongoing relationships. Perhaps most important of all, it encourages people, especially younger scholars, to take risks by presenting lines of research and ideas in their formative stages in a supportive atmosphere.

This is not to say that conferences like AAA are not worthwhile; there are still many valid reasons to attend them, such as those noted in an earlier section of this article. But we are raising questions about whether the cultural environments for processing ideas at such large conferences can be improved. Clearly a conference attended by thousands of members cannot emulate meetings of a much smaller number, but we believe there is room for a greater degree of flexibility at large conferences, including granting small groups of scholars concerned with specific topics more autonomy in the ways in which they organize their sessions. In other words, we are suggesting that the organizers of conferences, whatever

their scope, think through the implications of their formats for the nurturance of ideas and their implications for furthering the goals of their particular discipline. In any case, we would suggest that young scholars in particular might find it advantageous to seek out organizations in the mold of ASAO as venues to develop their nascent ideas.

Finally, we want to acknowledge that the conference formats we have contrasted in this paper represent only two of many anthropological associations, each of which holds periodic meetings in which ideas are discussed. A larger sampling of conference formats and their implications for processing ideas would be desirable and a worthy research project.[10] For another perspective on anthropological conferences (those convened by the Wenner-Gren Foundation over a period of years)—including a discussion of criteria for "successful" meetings, such as the importance of distributing papers beforehand to favor conversation over formal presentations—see Silverman 2002. More generally, we would like to see research projects aimed at tracking the trajectory of key ideas within a variety of interactive contexts, including conferences of various types.

Notes

[1] Within the context of the sociology of science (Merton 1973; Shapin 1995; Burawoy 2005), we note that studies of the social sciences do not seem to have flourished to the same degree as inquiries into the natural sciences such as particle physics (Knorr Cetina 1995; Masco 2004, 2013); biology and the life sciences (Latour and Woolgar [1979] 2013; Latour 1987; Helmreich 2009); and computer science (Helmreich 2000, 2001).

[2] With Vern Carroll and others, the first author played a role in the development of the association in the mid 1960s, and in the decades since he served in a myriad

roles including board member, program coordinator, membership coordinator, web master, and multiple times as session organizer. More recently, the second author served for several years as the ASAO program coordinator, and also on the association's Distinguished Lecturer Committee, the Pacific Islands Scholars Award committee, as well as a three-year term on the Board.

[3] https://www.asao.org/organizer-guidelines.html

[4] *ASAO Newsletters* are archived online at https://www.asao.org/asao-newsletters.html

[5] When developing its constitution in 1969, the association decided to allow its geographical focus to expand beyond Eastern Oceania in order to include Papua New Guinea (*ASAEO Newsletter* 5:1 [March 1970]).

[6] Details regarding AAA proposal submission types are posted on the AAA website:
https://www.americananthro.org/AttendEvents/Content.aspx?ItemNumber=2040

[7] AAA proposal review details are posted on the AAA website:
https://www.americananthro.org/AttendEvents/Content.aspx?ItemNumber=22463

[8] The AAA annual meeting/abstract FAQs are posted on the AAA website:
https://www.americananthro.org/ConnectWithAAA/FAQListAnnualMeeting.aspx?navItemNumber=635&navItemNumber=24140#parentVerticalTab30

[9] https://www.asao.org/asao-publications.html

[10] Robert A. Scott, Associate Director Emeritus of the Center for the Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University, who read a draft of this paper and gave us valuable feedback, raised the question of how the ASAO format fits the call for increased interdisciplinary work. In our opinion, an egalitarian environment such as that offered by ASAO would be vital for any kind of interdisciplinary development because it will inevitably require considerable

negotiation and the ability of participants to set aside the prevailing paradigms of their disciplines in favor of other possibilities. This kind of collaborative development is only likely to take place over an extended period of collegial discussions.

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