

## **The Anatomy of a Conference: Commentary on the 37<sup>th</sup> SAANZ Conference**

*Martin Tolich*

The 37<sup>th</sup> SAANZ conference held at the University of Otago 26-28 November 2008 attracted 150 registrants giving 125 individual papers. The conference was jointly organised by the Sociology and Gender Studies Programmes in the Department of Anthropology, Gender and Sociology, University of Otago drawing support from sociologists throughout the campus inclusive of physical education, gender studies, disability studies, education, commerce, anthropology, social work and sustainable agriculture.

Sociology began at the University of Otago in 2004 and now has three (soon to be four) staff members. The conference was an attempt to situate Sociology at the University of Otago within the national sociological infrastructure which we think was realised. The conference theme, "Multidisciplinary Sociology" captured this local campus wide interdisciplinary character. On behalf of the seven postgraduate students thanks go to BRCCS who funded seven postgraduate students travel costs to the conference. It is customary for SAANZ to float the organising committee \$500 and, although offered, we believe our decline was a first. The conference was strongly supported by the Division of Humanities, underwritten for \$5000, but in the end the conference turned a profit.

The conference began with the traditional welcome from Tangata Whenua together with Gender Studies and Sociology Staff/postgraduate students singing the University of Otago Division of Humanities Waiata. The Sociology conference effectively had a 'conference within a conference' in that an interdisciplinary Gender and Sexuality stream ran concurrently with the main program. At the same time as the first of the Gender and Sexuality stream's sessions took place two pre-conference workshops for postgraduate students *Job Markets and Publishing* facilitated by Kevin Dew, Charles Crothers, Pauline Norris and another on *Teaching Sociology* facilitated by Mark Falcous, Charles Crothers were held.

The main conference included some 5 blocks of 5 streams, each with 3 speakers, together with three keynote speakers, a book author meets critics session, a conference dinner and a SAANZ AGM. Finally, a BBQ was held for volunteers and those staying beyond the end of the conference.

The International keynote speakers were:

- Nicky Hager, Author of *Hollow Men*, Corngate. "Imagining a world where the PR people had won."
- Professor Elspeth Probyn, Gender Studies, University of Sydney. "Taste and Place: Transglobal refigurations or where, what and how we eat."
- Professor Micheal Ungar, Dalhousie University. "Negotiating Resilience".

The Authors vs. Critic session featured Chris Brickell's book "Mates and Lovers: The History of Gay New Zealand" with panel Mark Seymour, Robert Aldrich, Sandy Callister, Andrew Gorman-Murray (published elsewhere in this issue of *NZ Sociology*).

To illustrate the breadth of papers, the Session titles included:

Cinema, Work, Social Networks, Qualitative Methods, Family, Theorising Society, Performances, Media (2), Ethnicity (3), Violence, Health (2), Relationships, Sexuality & Space, University, Internet, International Subjects, Culture, Environment, War & Peace, Negotiating Sexual Relationships, Tourism, Politics, International, Reproduction, Disability, Ethics, Utopia, Policy.

### **Response:**

Forty of the attendees responded to an invitation to share their thoughts on the highs and lows of this conference. The survey asked conference delegates to respond to four open-ended questions: what they liked and disliked about the conference, and suggestions for improvements and ideas for future conferences. This report summarises their feedback along four themes:

- First, overwhelmingly delegates were positive about the organisation of the conference but wanted future conferences to be longer by half a day, less frenetic, with longer sessions. The

fifteen minutes per speaker, with five minutes for questions, was unilaterally unpopular.

- Second, a more interactive conference with more workshop sessions both before, and during, the conference was a recurrent suggestion.
- Third, hotspots for discontent were the labelling of the food and the cost of the conference dinner.
- Fourth, many singular excellent ideas for future conferences were registered including a who's who for future keynote speakers.

One respondent summed up the flow of the event as:

How a venue works is important as is the care of the background organising: St. Margaret's is particularly good and the conference all flowed very smoothly and quietly. A good intellectual tone was set through good, appropriate and pleasant guest speakers, plus the author meets critic session which created an important collective sense of intellectual endeavour. Slightly mysteriously the whole gathering seemed to have a timetabling, flow and completeness which gave it a very considerable unity and communal spirit. I thought it was excellent how the organizers assembled the 'invisible college' of OU sociologists across a wide range of sites and showed how (multi-disciplinary) *sociology* has infiltrated far beyond the limited realms of (disciplinary) *Sociology*. I think, though, some of the older attendees were quite taken aback by the consuming interest of younger sociologists in what seemed an array of micro-sociological concerns about bodies, sexuality and so forth, at the expense perhaps of the more critical macro-sociology.

### **A Brilliant Venue**

All respondents described St Margaret's as being an ideal conference venue, many saying it was the best conference venue. The close proximity of the accommodation, restaurant, and session rooms allowed people not to waste time transiting rooms. A couple commented, however, some of the session rooms were a tad cosy. The traditional welcome from Tangata Whenua was appreciated by visitors as was the singing of the Waiata. One respondent summed it as:

- The powhiri, the general warm welcome from staff, the friendly atmosphere of the conference and the beautiful venue.

Besides the St Margaret's venue, the respondents liked the quality and quantity of the food, the chance to network in convivial surroundings, the preloading of power points, the compact A5 program listing sessions and paper abstracts accompanied by a small cardboard two-day flip-chart program.

Jim Cullinane was commissioned to make a DVD of the conference. The unstated goal was to establish the relevance of a sociology conference, as if TV One News turned up. What would be our response? A 13-minute version of the DVD was cut, in double quick time, and shown at the conference dinner. It was well received in lieu of an after-dinner speaker. Eventually the DVD was shortened to seven minutes and posted on YouTube: ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y6zu2s\\_nyYQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y6zu2s_nyYQ)).

### **Longer Presentations and a Longer Conference**

Many respondents wanted the paper sessions lengthened and the conference extended by half a day. Traditionally, the conference has stopped at lunch on the third day. The organising team considered a later end time but noted that in the past few people stay for third day afternoon and those who draw these sessions found few in the audience. In hindsight, and based on the following comments this assumption was in error.

- Every one of the papers I went to was very rushed - presenters were cutting out sections of their talks and/or rushing through so points were not well made, questions were limited etc. It was immensely frustrating.
- The next conference committee should re-consider the 20-minute presentation time slots. People come from great distances and this is the only peer community to which we can turn for in-depth critique of our ideas.
- I listened to people become breathless trying to fit into 15 minutes, which seems a shame at an event for intellectual exchange.
- The speaking slots were too short, and the result was a rushed, pressured conference with not enough time to hear people speak, ask questions, and get a good sense of what research people were

doing. I would suggest lengthening the next conference by a day or half day (or alternatively having more streams, or both), and then lengthening the conference speaking slots to half an hour per person. This would make the conference less pressured, more enjoyable, and a better learning opportunity for everybody.

- Generally speaking, the conference pace was somewhat on the frenetic side for my taste. Lengthening the conference, including workshops, lengthening speaking slots, and having short breaks between sessions that follow directly on from each other, would all help.
- Others found fault with the form, not the content
- I found it unsatisfactory to listen to a presenter read their slides. Ban PowerPoint.

### **Conference Workshops and Programme**

The pre-conference workshops for postgraduate students were seen as excellent sessions.

- It was great to see the postgraduates supporting the pre-conference session.
- [teaching workshop] could have been longer. However, we did not know how good they would be.

Each of the keynote speakers was mentioned in the survey. Some were disappointed Professor Ungar parachuted in yet others were delighted Nicky Hager spent most of the second day at sessions and networking. Asked whom they would like as future keynote speakers led to the following suggestions:

James Belich, Noam Chomsky, Helen Clark, Len Cook, Bronwyn Davies, Mitchell Dunier, Tony Elliott, Carolyn Ellis, Robert Fisk, Glenn Greenwald, Pranee Liamputtong, Steve Maharey, Gregor McLennan, Stejepan Mestrovic, Jane Ribbens, Jeremy Scahill, John Urry.

An innovative conference feature mentioned by respondents as being worth repeating at future conferences was the Author vs. Critics session. Some of the respondents struggled a bit to articulate how they thought the conference had worked so well.

Many responses to the question “What events do not happen at SAANZ conferences but should?” focused attention on a different, more semi-structured dialogue among colleagues in workshop situation:

- make some of the 90 minute sessions hands on workshops or roundtables
- a closing session commenting on the value of what has been covered in the few days.
- writing workshop/s about mistakes others have made, problems they have encountered
- more opportunity for Masters/PhD students to discuss aspects of research and writing before the conference.
- an ethics panel/floor debate.

### **A Potpourri of Useful Suggestions:**

- At other conferences I have attended people's emails have been listed in the booklet with their abstracts, and I have found that useful.
- Dinner MC should encourage people to move one between courses to make new contacts.
- More prizes to give out – Best conference paper, Best PhD paper, Best Hons. paper, Best Book, Best NZ Sociology article
- A two tiered conference with quality assurance/refereeing of conference papers
- Two types of papers – full conference presentations, and working papers. A number of sessions contained working papers in very early stages of development and I would like an indication in advance.
- Meeting of HODs
- The AGM needs its own, proper, time slot... not to be shoved into the one bit of free-time-before-dinner in a very full-on day.
- Make the powhiri a more significant event and maybe we should do something to ensure the association members know a waiata!
- Theme for 2009 Conference. “Credit crunch” or “Living in a debt society- implications for sociology and society”
- Print people’s FIRST names very large and their second below
- a strong health stream at next year's conference
- the conference abstract booklet needs to have an ISN number
- Poster session stream
- Book publishers’ displays
- A fieldtrip i.e. 'Littledene' at Christchurch.

## **Hotspots**

**The food** was generally liked though more attention should be given to labelling of gluten free food, vegetarian and more choice given at the dinner for vegetarian.

- I think people's special dietary requirements should be taken more seriously; otherwise, it comes across as careless and dismissive.
- Labels needed on vegetarian and non-vegetarian food. You cannot tell whether a pastry has meat in it until you bite into it, and it is not wonderful having to peer closely into sandwich fillings either, to tell the truth.
- It would have been nice to have some food available for people with food allergies/sensitivities. I am gluten-free and brought my own lunch on both days. This is not a big deal for me and I am used to fending for myself, but I really appreciate it when there are options available for me as well.

## **The cost of the dinner attracted comment:**

- a grad/post-grad dinner might be a good idea, as most don't attend the official conference dinner (cost being a key factor) and if they do they often feel 'left out' of the 'old network' type atmosphere. In addition, it gives post-grads a chance to socialise a bit more than is afforded at the breakfast.
- subsidise the dinner for graduate students.
- consider different prices for dinner for postgraduates and teetotallers.
- MC could shorten speeches and ask people to rotate seating.
- The conference dinner could have started with pre-dinner drinks and nibbles so people are able to mingle before sitting down to dinner. The speeches could have been kept to a minimum.
- \$60 for a 2-course meal for a non-drinker is somewhat steep, especially as there was no tea/coffee afterwards. This was a surprise as the quantity and quality of the food overall was superb.
- A very disappointing vegetarian option at the conference dinner. We veggies like to eat well too. Jeesh... Spaghetti??!
- The conference dinner was expensive for what was provided
- The only reservation I had about the dinner was that some of the tables were very wide, making it difficult to talk to those across the table.

**The Bottom Line**

Many thanks for those who supported the conference and especially those who shared their thoughts of what was good, not so good, and what future SAANZ conferences could look like.