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Hales, Samuel and Lister, Victoria P.M. (2020) Conference review: The Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers (ATSA) 38th Annual Research & Treatment Conference, Wednesday 6 - Saturday 9 November 2019. Review of: The Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers (ATSA) 38th Annual Research & Treatment Conference by UNSPECIFIED. *PsyPAG Quarterly* (115).

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.27569.40805>

Link to record in KAR

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/81919/>

Document Version

Author's Accepted Manuscript

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This is a pre-publication version of the following article: Hales, S. T., & Lister, V. P. M. (2020). Conference review: The Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers (ATSA) 38th Annual Research & Treatment Conference, Wednesday 6 - Saturday 9 November 2019. *PsyPAG Quarterly*, 115, 38-40. <http://www.psyag.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/PsyPAG-115-June.pdf>

Conference Review

The Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers (ATSA) 38th Annual Research & Treatment Conference, Wednesday 6 - Saturday 9 November 2019

For over thirty years, ATSA's Annual Conference has brought together experts from across the globe to discuss best practices in sexual abuse prevention. The landmark four-day event offers various symposia, roundtables, clinics, and workshops relating to the treatment of individuals who have engaged in sexually offending behaviours, and is considered one of the most prolific regular mass-gatherings of sexual violence prevention advocates internationally. In this article, we review our experiences of ATSA's 2019 Conference in Atlanta, Georgia and reflect on the key take-home lessons we learned from our first international conference.

This year's ATSA Conference saw over 1,200 individuals from more than ten countries coming together in the United States to share their ideas of 'what works' in sexual abuse prevention and treatment. Delegates included researchers, treatment providers, policymakers, and law enforcement agencies, as well as human rights advocates, survivors of abuse, and individuals who have committed sexual offences.

Under the theme of 'Shaping the Future', the Conference hosted a broad range of training opportunities for attendees—from general crime prevention seminars to more specialist sexual abuse clinics—led by expert panels. As ever, this year's conference was underpinned by ATSA's strategic goals: to encourage sound research, promote effective practice, and develop informed policy relating to sexual abuse prevention.

Plenary sessions

This year's conference included four plenary ('keynote') talks given by leading experts in sexual abuse research, prevention, and treatment. The first plenary was given by Professor Theresa A. Gannon (our supervisor) and outlined the findings of her and her colleague's recent meta-analysis on the effectiveness of treatment programmes for individuals who have committed sexual harm (see Gannon, Olver, Mallion, & James, 2019). Contrary to recent evaluations of the UK's *Core Sex Offenders' Treatment Programme* (SOTP; see Mews, Di Bella, & Purver, 2017), Theresa et al.'s results discovered a positive treatment effect and highlighted some indicators which may increase the effectiveness of offending behaviour programmes for individuals who have engaged in sexually offending behaviours (e.g., facilitation by a trained psychologist).

On day two, the conference was opened by an insightful talk by Professor Paul Bloom on empathy and why it should not be used in forensic practice. Paul argued that empathy can negatively impact moral decision-making, and suggested that compassion and pro-social motivation should be adopted when working with individuals who have sexually harmed. Another plenary was given by Dr. Linda Dahlberg on the primary prevention of violence in the community. This talk focused on why the sector should work towards the adoption of a

‘public health approach’ when dealing with sexual violence and Linda explained each of the stages to go about doing this.

On the final day, Dr. Kurt Bumby and Kristen Houser spoke about how to navigate the challenging dynamics of discussing working with individuals who have sexually abused to those outside of research and practice. Both speakers provided practical strategies for effective messaging and language-use which can be used when discussing the topic, based on their own experiences of working in the field. This talk provided a relaxed, yet insightful, way of closing the conference and was well-received by the audience.

Concurrent sessions

One hundred hour-and-a-half concurrent sessions were offered by ATSA to attendees, which were led by leading names in the field of sexual abuse prevention and treatment. These included hands-on training in the most modern risk assessment instruments, roundtables on implementing evidence-based practice and evaluating programme outcomes, and specialist clinics in paraphilias, online offending, and harmful sexual behaviours.

For Vicky, a session of particular interest was led by Seth Wescott, Kim Kosmala, and David Prescott, and focussed on pornography and its role in precipitating sexually harmful behaviours. The speakers presented a number of different papers on the topic, from case studies to meta-analyses, which initiated insightful whole-group discussions. These discussions brought together individuals from a variety of prevention-centred occupations, including probation officers, psychologists, and academic researchers, and emphasised the importance of collaborative work in our field.

For Sam, the most thought-provoking session was delivered by David Lee, Joan Tabachnick, and Jannine Hébert on advancing institutional commitments to preventing sexual abuse. In this clinic, the three speakers described common issues faced by organisations, charities, and—most notably—universities in tackling rising sexual assault and harassment complaints. By harnessing their collective experiences and cutting-edge research in the field, David, Joan, and Jannine engaged participants in a stimulating conversation about what they can do to support colleagues in reducing sexual victimization across their sector. The key take-home message: institutional prevention policies and interventions should be evidence-based, empirically informed, and founded on our understanding of sexual abuse perpetrators and their victims.

Another noteworthy contender was the ‘Clinical & Data Blitz’, which saw 11 (mostly psychology) students present their recent academic or clinical work in five-minute timeslots. Similar to the UK’s 3MT® competition, this session offered graduate students the opportunity to communicate their research—most of which was conducted at undergraduate or Master’s level—to experienced academics and treatment providers, and develop their general presentation skills. It also provided the audience with an opportunity to hear about some of the most innovative and contemporary work being conducted by the next generation of academics and professionals. This year’s session saw students giving talks on adverse childhood experiences and aggression, rape myth acceptance, and registry reform for those who have sexually offended. Again, this session was very well received.

Summary

For students like us who were used only to relatively small UK conferences, a large-scale international event like ATSA’s Annual Conference was daunting. The huge volume of people seemed overwhelming at first and we found it easy to lose ourselves in the conference hotel. However, the kindness and genuine willingness of other attendees to talk with us about

our work, as well as the foresight of ATSA's General and Student Committees (for example, to lay on welcome drinks and set up networking events), soon allayed our worries and helped us to settle in. Before we knew it, we had crammed our journals with notes, filled our phones with photos, and we were packing our bags to return home.

Having now attended an international conference, we would definitely return to another. The learning experiences and the networking opportunities that the event affords you are well worth the travel, the expense (ATSA registration costs upwards of \$125 for students), and the initial trepidation. If you meet up with other students beforehand or during, you guarantee yourself an excellent time and have a companion throughout the conference. We would thoroughly recommend attending a large-scale event like ATSA's Annual Conference if one is available in your field.

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