

Conference Review

The Institute on Violence, Abuse & Trauma's (IVAT) 25th San Diego International Summit, Sunday 30 August – Wednesday 2 September 2020

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Founded in 1984, the Institute on Violence, Abuse & Trauma (IVAT) has been delivering innovative and sector-leading harm prevention research summits annually for over 20 years. These events, which bring together clinicians, researchers, and policymakers from across the globe, comprise four days' worth of invigorating knowledge exchange opportunities, including structured networking events, evidence-informed workshops, and prestigious keynote talks. Here, I review the highlights of this year's virtual San Diego Summit – one of two flagship events hosted by IVAT each year – and offer my personal reflections on attending large-scale international events in the era of Covid-19.

IVAT's summits constitute some of the largest international events on the topic of violence, abuse, and trauma. This year's summit – conducted virtually – was no different and assembled over 1050 participants from 17 countries and 49 US states to discuss and learn about cutting-edge harm prevention research and practice. True to form, the organisation hosted a diverse range of summit sessions for participants to enrol onto, delivered by expert speakers from around the globe. Two parallel poster sessions were also available, which provided students and early-career researchers the opportunity to present and receive feedback on their work. Like others previously, this year's summit was underpinned by IVAT's clear and noble mission statement: To condemn violence and oppression in all its forms, and work for equality and peace internationally.

Keynote talks

This year IVAT hosted two excellent plenary speakers who each delivered a keynote

lecture to commence the summit. The first talk entitled 'From rage to reconciliation' was delivered by Oliver Williams, a Professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Minnesota and a clinical practitioner specialising in mental and sexual health and violence. In his talk, Professor Williams spoke about how clinicians and harm prevention practitioners can capitalise on their clients' anger and that of their victims to help bring about reconciliation between both parties. Referring to his 35 years of service in the field, Professor Williams offered multiple examples of how he has bridged gaps between those who have perpetrated harm and the individuals and communities they have hurt, and inspired attendees to embed more compassion in their work.

The second keynote talk entitled 'Let us do no harm: Preventing trauma through public policy' was given by Lynn Rosenthal, President for the Center for Family Safety & Healing and former White House Advisor on Violence Against Women. Rosenthal spoke at length about how she became an agent for

change by encouraging government officials in Washington, D.C. to tighten outdated interpersonal violence laws, and how she brought together harm prevention advocates, charities, and researchers to lobby policymakers to develop new initiatives to address violence against women. Rosenthal concluded her talk by discussing ongoing work being conducted across the US into the development of more trauma-informed public policies and encouraged attendees to engage with relevant charities, non-governmental organisations, and public bodies to help inform and accelerate these changes.

As an early career researcher with interests in harm prevention, hearing the stories and advice of more learned colleagues is always a pleasure. Both Williams' and Rosenthal's talks exemplified to me the benefits of employing empathy, compassion, and understanding when working with both perpetrators and victim/survivors of violence and encouraged me to reflect on my own working practices with both groups.

Summit tracks and sessions

The main feature of IVAT's summits are the summit sessions, which offer attendees the chance to learn in-depth about specialist topics relevant to harm prevention and violence protection. This year, 130 sessions were available to book onto, which were led by 350 expert speakers internationally. These sessions aligned with one of 13 distinct summit tracks that spanned topics such as sexual victimisation, issues in legal and criminal justice, and child maltreatment. The sessions that I attended were linked to one of the more popular tracks – campus assault – which comprised eleven standalone learning events.

An early session I attended was delivered by Dr. Brianna Delker, Alexis-Adams Clark, and Melissa Barnes on the topic of institutional betrayal and university sexual violence. The speakers outlined the many varied ways that universities re-victimise and re-traumatise student survivors of sexual violence by, for example, taking actions that

enable abuse to occur or failing to hold perpetrators to account. They highlighted that institutional betrayal can have debilitating physical and psychological health implications for survivors, beyond the act of sexual violence they experienced, including increased risk of suicide. The three speakers closed the session by describing how individuals who work in university settings can apply the findings of trauma research to practice through means of institutional courage: a commitment to truth-seeking, engagement in moral action, accountability, and transparency by an institution, despite unpleasantness, risk, and short-term cost (see Freyd & Smidt, 2019).

Another session of interest and that was well attended was a discussion on working with campus assault in the era of Covid-19. Here, four expert speakers – Dr. Dorothy Espelage, Chrissy Weathersby Ball, Meredith Smith, and Dr. Jacqueline White – explained to participants the impact of the evolving higher education landscape on the perpetration and reporting of university sexual assault, and the ways that university staff can ensure that students are kept safe during the pandemic. This included, for example, developing more effective interventions to reach students during Covid-19 and delivering better campus-wide messaging and promotion around personal safety and harm prevention. Further sessions I attended covered topics such as sexual violence in high schools, how to implement service-oriented prevention programming in campus settings, and developing effective campus climate surveys.

A new offering worthy of note during this year's summit was the IVAT self-care sessions, available to all attendees as part of their registration cost. These sessions, which ran daily, offered participants a way to relax and unwind from the intensity of the summit, and were led by trained practitioners or facilitators. In total, eleven self-care sessions were offered, including yoga, sound healing, mindfulness, and improvisational comedy. These were supplemented by an online

Zen Den, which offered creative self-care activities and videos to support and nurture attendee's psychological and physical health.

Taken as a whole, I was extremely impressed with the wide offering of talks offered by IVAT. The encouragement this year by the organisation that speakers should include in their talks intersectional research was appreciated and meant that participants could learn about advances in research and practice involving often marginalised and under-represented groups. Personally, I would value if similar moves were made by other wide-reaching international organisations at their conferences, to allow participants to reflect on the efficacy of their working practices and to encourage more inclusivity in the harm prevention field.

Poster sessions

Alongside summit track sessions, IVAT also hosted two hour-long poster sessions, which were very well attended. Designed as a way for students and early-career researchers to present their work to summit attendees, these sessions showcased some of the most contemporary and innovative research being conducted at universities globally. In total, 99 presenters gave 80 two-minute presentations on their work, which comprised systematic reviews, meta-analyses, empirical studies, theoretical pieces, and clinical case studies.

Presentations were assigned to one of six sessions based on their research theme – these covered a range of topics, including resilience among sexually abused children to adult dating violence. The sexual aggression and trafficking session, where I presented my ongoing empirical work on the psychological profiles of male students who perpetrate sexual assault at UK universities (see Hales & Gannon, 2020), hosted 14 posters and welcomed well over 100 attendees, who learned about recent research covering military sexual trauma, sexual violence in athletics, and support for male victims of assault. Question and answer sessions were conducted with individual presenters to encourage discussion of their findings and

three research prizes were awarded to the posters that best exemplified the aims of IVAT. Posters are still available for viewing at www.ivatcenters.org/virtual-poster-session.

Whilst various posters sparked my interest, one that stood out to me most was a literature review of females who have sexually offended, presented by Julie L. Williams (Florida School of Professional Psychology). The poster, with its clear design and helpful infographics, covered various areas of forensic assessment and treatment, including typologies of offender, the various hypothesised pathways to offending, and effective gender responsive treatment interventions for those who have offended. Given that there has been relatively little attention paid to females who offend sexually (versus their males counterparts), I came away from this poster session eager to learn more and with several ideas for future research studies.

Reflection on virtual conferences

Undoubtedly, the opportunity to attend large-scale conferences and summits across the globe is a personal highlight of doctoral-level study. The fact that there are so many leading organisations who host annual events relevant to my PhD research is an added bonus. However, against the backdrop of Covid-19, the shutdown of national borders, and the threat of quarantine for hopeful travellers, I was sceptical as to whether international events were going to be viable avenues for knowledge exchange opportunities this year. IVAT's 25th San Diego Summit reassured me that they would be – for the meanwhile, though, they are taking a quite different form.

Setting aside the fact that sessions ran to Pacific Time (seven hours behind Greenwich Mean Time), I very much enjoyed my first taste of virtual conferencing. By dint of the various chat options embedded into Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and the summit app, I found myself interacting more with other delegates and presenters than I typically would during a face-to-face event. This encouraged more in-depth and

constructive discussions on harm prevention techniques and meant that it was relatively easy to share resources and materials with one-another. The fact that there was such a diverse participation was an added benefit and, I found, discouraged the 'silo effect' of academia (wherein academics associate only with colleagues within their field, to the detriment of wider learning). For example, during the four-days of the summit, I had the pleasure of interacting with participants from Argentina, Georgia, Israel, and Taiwan – countries infrequently represented at large-scale US conferences, but which have decades of experience in researching and treating violent offending behaviour. Given the high costs associated with attending conferences such as IVAT's in-person (where international participants can expect to pay well over £800 in registration fees, accommodation, and travel), I doubt that these interactions would have occurred was the summit not held virtually.

Of course, the summit also provided the normal offerings: participants could purchase from an online bookstore containing texts recommended by session hosts, interact with other attendees in a (simulated) exhibit hall, and claim continuing education credits in return for active participation in the event. Given that this was my first virtual summit, this familiarity was very much welcomed. However, I also support some of the new features; for example, the self-care sessions, which were available daily to participants, provided a nice break from the complex and

frequently-emotive discussions on violence, abuse, and trauma, and allowed for reflection on some of the lessons learned that day in a 'safe' environment. I would welcome the inclusion of such sessions at in-person conferences.

Conclusion

In sum, I was pleasantly surprised by my first virtual large-scale international conference. My initial apprehensions about the effectiveness of online learning, presenting, and networking were quickly averted as I became aware that the summit organisers had dedicated a lot of time and resources to ensuring that they delivered the most competitive and cost-effective event possible. Truth be told, I still believe that the benefits of in-person conferences outweigh those of virtual ones, and I missed being able to meet and interact with colleagues new and old face-to-face. For the meanwhile, though, I support organisations who are making the effort to adapt to the current climate by changing the way they deliver their events and training, and I wholeheartedly encourage other students and researchers not to be put off by this 'new' approaching to learning.

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