
Academic Conferences: When Small is Beautiful

David C. Yamada*

I. INTRODUCTION

Reflections on organizing an academic gathering easily risk becoming a navel-gazing exercise, and not a very interesting one at that. Those risks notwithstanding, I wish to use the occasion of an April 2014 program at Suffolk University Law School to champion the virtues of smaller academic events that promote genuine dialogue and move at a slower, more contemplative pace. Although I do not promise that I will offer anything especially profound here, this may plant a seed in others to develop similar programs and even have some fun in the process.

The two day program held at Suffolk—The Study and Practice of Law in a Therapeutic Key: An Introduction to Therapeutic Jurisprudence—centered on the scholarly and practical applications of therapeutic jurisprudence (TJ). TJ is a school of legal thought that, in the words of TJ co-founder and law professor David Wexler, involves “the ‘study of the role of the law as a therapeutic agent’” by focusing “on the law’s impact on emotional life and on psychological well-being.”¹ According to TJ scholar and law professor Michael Perlin, TJ “recognizes that substantive rules, legal procedures and lawyers’ roles may have either therapeutic or anti-therapeutic consequences and questions whether such rules, procedures and roles can or should be reshaped so as to enhance their therapeutic potential, while preserving due process principles.”² Our gathering developed these themes during a daylong Friday public symposium on the applications of TJ to law teaching and legal practice, followed by a Saturday private workshop for presenters and invited guests.

All too often, conference attendance and participation is all about the result, not the experience or process. Furthermore, the larger the size of the conference, the more likely that its focus becomes self-centered. For instance,

* Professor of Law and Director, New Workplace Institute, Suffolk University Law School, Boston, MA. J.D., New York University.

1. David Wexler, *Therapeutic Jurisprudence: An Overview*, 17 T.M. COOLEY L. REV. 125, 125 (2000) (quoting LAW IN A THERAPEUTIC KEY: DEVELOPMENTS IN THERAPEUTIC JURISPRUDENCE xvii (David B. Wexler & Bruce J. Winick eds., 1996)); see also David B. Wexler, *International Network on Therapeutic Jurisprudence*, U. ARIZ., <http://www.law.arizona.edu/depts/upr-intj/> (last visited Feb. 14, 2015), archived at <http://perma.cc/NVD6-XR9L>.

2. Michael L. Perlin, *A Law of Healing*, 68 U. CIN. L. REV. 407, 408 (2000).

the dominant questions become: *How did my presentation go? Did I say or do anything dumb? What did I learn? Did I meet any “important” people? Did I make any useful contacts?* Under such circumstances, the quality of both interaction and engagement become secondary priorities.

In light of these realities, perhaps we would benefit by favoring academic and professional events that are more interactive—even enjoyable. The emphasis would be on a different set of questions: *Did we all get something out of the program? Did we learn from one another? Did we enjoy each other’s company? Was it engaging and even fun?* I would like to reflect on the academic conference with these framing questions in mind.

II. APRIL 2014 TJ PROGRAM

Given TJ’s implicit bias toward laws, legal systems, and legal institutions that promote psychologically healthy outcomes, it is especially fitting to use a program on TJ to ponder how we can create academic events that are lower on stress and higher on fellowship and engagement. The impetus for this gathering grew out of conversations with North American colleagues at a large conference on law and mental health held in Amsterdam, Netherlands during the summer of 2013. We agreed to plan a small event for 2014, and I offered Boston and Suffolk University Law School as the venue. The main objectives were to create a comfortable space to discuss the future of the TJ movement and to introduce TJ to interested attorneys and professors in the Boston area.

A. Day 1

The two-day program began with a symposium on Friday that included morning and afternoon panels and a short lunch talk, drawing upon outside speakers and Suffolk faculty. We were joined by a small but engaged group of attendees, mostly law professors and practicing lawyers from the Greater Boston area. The morning panel examined TJ applications to law teaching and practice generally:

- Michael Jones (Arizona Summit Law School) presented “Teaching Therapeutic Jurisprudence.”³
- Shelley Kierstead (York University, Osgoode Hall) presented “Legal Writing, TJ, and Professionalism.”⁴
- Amy Ronner (St. Thomas University Law School) presented “Lessons from Bartleby the Scrivener for an Appellate Practice Clinic.”⁵

3. Michael D. Jones, *Teaching TJ: Therapeutic Jurisprudence for Law Students*, 3 SUFFOLK U. L. REV. ONLINE 25 (2015).

4. Shelley Kierstead, *Legal Writing, Therapeutic Jurisprudence, and Professionalism*, 3 SUFFOLK U. L. REV. ONLINE 29 (2015).

5. Professor Ronner’s presentation was drawn from Amy D. Ronner, *The Learned-Helpless Lawyer*:

- David Wexler (University of Puerto Rico School of Law) presented "The Emotional and Legal Benefits of Reforming Legal Forms."⁶
- Kathleen Elliott Vinson (Suffolk University Law School) served as the discussant, offering responses to the presenters that led into more Q&A from those in the room.⁷

During lunch, David Wexler discussed the past, present, and future of TJ, sharing some of his thoughts on how TJ can be mainstreamed in the criminal and juvenile justice arenas.⁸

The afternoon panel examined TJ applications to a sampling of specific legal practice areas:

- Mark Glover (University of Wyoming College of Law) presented "The Solemn Moment: Expanding Therapeutic Jurisprudence Throughout Estate Planning."⁹
- Michael Perlin (New York Law School) presented "'There's a Dyin' Voice Within Me Reaching Out Somewhere': How TJ Can Bring Voice to the Teaching of Mental Disability and Criminal Law."¹⁰
- Amanda Peters (South Texas College of Law) presented "TJ and Mental Health Courts."¹¹
- Gabriel Teninbaum (Suffolk University Law School) presented "Putting Patients First in the Aftermath of Medical Malpractice."¹²
- I presented "Employment Law, Stress, and Employee Well-Being."¹³

Clinical Legal Education and Therapeutic Jurisprudence as Antidotes to Bartleby Syndrome, 24 *TOURO L. REV.* 601 (2008).

6. Professor Wexler's presentation was drawn from David B. Wexler, *Therapeutic Jurisprudence, Legal Landscapes, and Form Reform: The Case of Diversion*, 10 *FLA. COASTAL L. REV.* 361 (2009)

7. Professor Vinson is the Director of the Legal Practice Skills program at Suffolk University Law School and President of the Association of Legal Writing Directors.

8. David B. Wexler, *The HiL Innovating Justice Forum, Therapeutic Jurisprudence, and Legal Education: New Opportunities*, 3 *SUFFOLK U. L. REV. ONLINE* 45 (2015).

9. Mark Glover, *The Solemn Moment: Expanding Therapeutic Jurisprudence Throughout Estate Planning*, 3 *SUFFOLK U. L. REV. ONLINE* 19 (2015).

10. Michael L. Perlin, "There's a Dyin' Voice Within Me Reaching Out Somewhere:" *How TJ Can Bring Voice to the Teaching of Mental Disability Law and Criminal Law*, 3 *SUFFOLK U. L. REV. ONLINE* 37 (2015).

11. Professor Peters's presentation was drawn from Amanda Peters, *Resource Problem Solving in Therapeutic Courts*, 2 *MENTAL HEALTH L. & POL'Y J.* 117 (2013).

12. Professor Teninbaum's presentation was drawn from Gabriel H. Teninbaum, *How Medical Apology Programs Harm Patients*, 15 *CHAP. L. REV.* 307 (2011).

13. My presentation was drawn from a blog post, David Yamada, *Why Targets of Workplace Bullying Need Our Help: A Rallying Cry from the Heart*, *MINDING THE WORKPLACE* (Sept. 9, 2013), <https://newworkplace.wordpress.com/2013/09/09/why-targets-of-workplace-bullying-need-our-help-a-rallying-cry-from-the-heart/>, archived at <https://perma.cc/3B7W-ZX2J>, and from my previous scholarship on human dignity, employment law, workplace bullying, see, e.g., David C. Yamada, *Employment Law As If People Mattered: Bringing Therapeutic Jurisprudence into the Workplace*, 11 *FLA. COASTAL L. REV.* 257 (2010); David C. Yamada, *Human Dignity and American Employment Law*, 43 *U. RICH. L. REV.* 523 (2009); David C.

Although we did not jettison the panel discussion format, we built in plenty of time for questions and comments. We intentionally kept the scale of the event to a modest size, aiming for a few dozen people, counting both presenters and attendees.¹⁴ We also attempted to create a more laid-back feel to the event, using first names and a meeting room (rather than a classroom).

Of course, what really makes or breaks an event like this are the people involved, and that is what made such a positive difference here. Between presenters and attendees, the discussion was free of professorial “gunners” or others trying to score debating points intended to show off supposed intellectual prowess. Rather, it was a day of stimulating presentations and thoughtful conversations.

The Friday evening offering was a karaoke night at a club in Boston’s theatre district. We rented a small studio and crooned to some favorite tunes. We had fun, and a couple of the non-incriminating photos made appearances on Facebook.

B. Day 2

Day 2 of the Boston gathering was a smaller scale workshop for presenters and guests. It consisted of quick rounds of personal updates on our latest activities and a discussion about the future of TJ as a movement and how to build its presence within legal education and the legal profession.¹⁵ We started at a reasonable morning hour and worked through mid-afternoon, remaining in a smaller meeting room at Suffolk. We had a light breakfast and lunch delivered to the room.

Our final activity was a short walk to Boston’s historic North End for an Italian dinner at an old-fashioned “red sauce” restaurant.

C. Feedback

I would not be using the experience of a small conference as grist for an essay but for the very positive feedback I received on this modest gathering from the out-of-town presenters. In short, this worked because we had the right format and the right participants. People came away from the extended weekend refreshed and inspired rather than tired, stressed, and glad that it was over. The schedule was lighter and the pace was slower. We had time to

Yamada, *The Phenomenon of “Workplace Bullying” and the Need for Status-Blind Hostile Work Environment Protection*, 88 GEO. L.J. 475 (2000).

14. Concededly, even with added publicity, this event would not have attracted multitudes from the practicing bar and other law schools. My only disappointment was the inability to attract Suffolk law students to the symposium, despite extended outreach efforts.

15. The group was joined by TJ-affiliated scholar Carol Zeiner of St. Thomas University, author of (among other works) Carol L. Zeiner, *A Therapeutic Jurisprudence Analysis of the Use of Eminent Domain to Create a Leasehold*, 33 UTAH ENVTL. L. REV. 197 (2013).

actually talk to each other throughout the two days. Furthermore, as the program organizer, I experienced it as an enjoyable (rather than anxiety-producing) event—which is no small blessing, as anyone who has put together programs can attest. In fact, I felt a bit sad when it was over.

III. WHEN SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL¹⁶

Every major academic field and learned society has its big annual gatherings. Attending, presenting, and networking at these events can have salutary effects on one's career and lead to desirable opportunities. Playing leadership roles in committees and sections associated with annual conferences may convey similar benefits. In turn, such participation may serve as a platform for sharing research and ideas that contribute to scholarly discussion and informed action. If the time and place are right, this can be an effective way to share one's work with a larger audience that extends beyond one's niche, specialization, or perceived political leanings—no small opportunity in academic life.

But there are downsides to many of these big conferences. They can be intimidating or overwhelming to veterans and newcomers alike. The atmosphere of such gatherings may reinforce predominant hierarchies within the sponsoring organization and promote a lot of “badge watching.” This calls into mind the concept of “rankism” or “rank-based abuse,” advanced by physicist and former Oberlin College President Robert Fuller.¹⁷ Fuller has written extensively about divisions between “somebodies” and “nobodies” in professional settings and feelings of deep “indignity and humiliation” that may be experienced by those who perceive themselves as being among the latter.¹⁸ One can easily feel like a “nobody” at a large conference.

We might assume that a larger conference presents something of an intellectual smorgasbord of offerings, appealing to both our specific and general interests. It is not unusual, however, to scan a conference agenda and find very little of interest beyond one's specific area. A larger, multi-day conference agenda may be simply the sum total of many panels on very narrow or highly specialized topics. Ultimately, in terms of time, emotional energy, and money expended, the cost-benefit analysis may not be appealing.

Admittedly, personal preferences come into play. With a few exceptions, I regard most large conferences as “should go” rather than “want to go” propositions.¹⁹ Although I have played the game, so to speak, and have

16. A rhetorical hat tip to E. F. SCHUMACHER, *SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL: ECONOMICS AS IF PEOPLE MATTERED* (1973), a seminal work in alternative economics that calls for scaled down economic systems grounded in human needs.

17. See ROBERT W. FULLER, *SOMEBODIES AND NOBODIES: OVERCOMING THE ABUSE OF RANK 2* (2003).

18. See *id.*

19. The biennial “Work, Stress and Health” conference co-sponsored by the American Psychological

benefited from doing so in terms of exposure for my work, I am at a point in my career where I regard larger events (at least most of them) as a chore rather than an opportunity.

Instead, I have come to strongly prefer smaller conferences, workshops, and symposia. For the most part, these events are more interpersonal and less imposing. If all or most of the panels or sessions are done as plenaries in a room roughly the size of a classroom or smaller, the overall event can take on an organic flow, with people learning from each other's questions and comments, and even seeking out one another during break times. In these settings, more superficial forms of networking give way to genuine conversations and create possibilities for future dialogue. Put simply, people get to know each other.

Smaller scale events also can move at a less frenzied pace. Maggie O'Neill, a Durham University criminology professor, recently wrote about the "slow movement" and its application to higher education.²⁰ According to O'Neill, the slow movement centers "around the need for a socio-cultural shift towards slowing down the pace of work, life and consumption, [and] improving well-being," among other things.²¹ She urges us to question "the speeding up of Higher Education," a trend marked by metrics, audits, competition, and performance targets.²² Smaller conferences are a partial antidote to that "speeding up" quality, often creating a more relaxed space for extended conversations and even room for genuine contemplation.

IV. PROVIDING A PUBLICATION OPPORTUNITY

One of the most common by-products of an academic conference is the so-called symposium issue of a scholarly journal. Contributing a symposium piece can be an opportunity, a burden, or both. On the positive side, it can offer a publication venue without engaging in the sometimes time-consuming submission process, with one's work appearing in a themed issue among good company. On the negative side, it can add considerably to the time and energy that must be devoted to conference follow up, and it may result in a piece that is somewhat padded or perhaps not as well developed as one might want it to be.

Association, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, and Society for Occupational Health Psychology is a prime example of a large conference that manages to be as collegial and inclusive as one could expect. For my commentary on this conference, see David Yamada, *Why Conferences?*, MINDING THE WORKPLACE (May 18, 2013), <http://newworkplace.wordpress.com/2013/05/18/why-conferences/>, archived at <https://perma.cc/TLF6-H4JS>.

20. Maggie O'Neill, *The Slow University—Work, Time and Well-Being*, DISCOVER SOC'Y (June 3, 2014), <http://www.discoversociety.org/2014/06/03/the-slow-university-work-time-and-well-being/>, archived at <http://perma.cc/N8UZ-7LG2>.

21. *Id.*

22. *Id.*

In planning the Suffolk conference, I opted for a lighter touch when it came to publication expectations. The *Suffolk University Law Review* now publishes an online edition featuring shorter essays and commentaries, and I saw it as an ideal way to offer an optional publication opportunity without imposing a big obligation on the speakers. Others will have to judge if this collection makes a strong case for a more modest approach to post-conference publication, but I believe it offers a sound compromise between letting the fruits of a good conference disappear completely versus adding yet another major writing obligation to the schedules of busy professors.

V. TWO OTHER POSSIBILITIES

In recent years, I have experienced two other academic conference formats that have successfully created the look and feel of being at a smaller, more personal scale event.

A. *Conference Within a Conference*

The biennial Congress of the International Academy on Law and Mental Health is a large-scale international event.²³ Dozens of panels run in concurrent time slots on a daily basis for a full week. With an international group of presenters descending upon a big city (Amsterdam, Berlin, and New York were the locations of the previous three Congresses), this easily becomes the type of event where one can feel lost in the crowd.

In conjunction with this Congress, the International Network on Therapeutic Jurisprudence has organized a conference within a conference—a series of panels on various aspects of therapeutic jurisprudence—held in the same room over the entire course of the event. While even those who are strongly connected to the TJ community often present at and attend other panels as well, the dedicated program of TJ-related panels serves as a sort of home base. People become more familiar with names and faces and thus are more likely to forge connections that would be more difficult to make without this ongoing series of panels.

Of course, the logistics of organizing a conference within a conference can be considerable, making this much more challenging to pull off than a smaller event. Such an effort requires soliciting panel proposals, reviewing abstracts, and working with the organizers of the larger conference. However, the benefits are tangible, in terms of both program content and the fostering of personal connections.

23. See generally *International Academy of Law and Mental Health*, INT'L ACAD. L. & MENTAL HEALTH, <http://www.ialmh.org/template.cgi> (last visited Feb. 14, 2015).

*B. Consciously Structured Conference*²⁴

Another approach to creating a smaller space within a conference is to consciously structure the event to nurture dialogue and exchange. A prime example is the annual Workshop on Transforming Humiliation and Violent Conflict, sponsored by the Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies Network (HumanDHS) and hosted by Teachers College, Columbia University, in New York. HumanDHS is a unique, cross-disciplinary association of scholars, practitioners, and activists devoted to advancing human dignity. Here is a self-description from its website:

We are a global transdisciplinary network and fellowship of concerned academics and practitioners. We wish to stimulate systemic change, globally and locally, to open space for dignity, for mutual respect and esteem to take root and grow, thus ending humiliating practices and breaking cycles of humiliation throughout the world.

We suggest that a frame of cooperation and shared humility is necessary—not a mindset of humiliation—if we wish to build a better world, a world of equal dignity for all.²⁵

The annual HumanDHS workshop is not a typical academic assemblage. For example, in a 2012 session in which I participated, we heard presentations about sojourns to the Amazon rainforest, conflict resolution on large and small scales, America's aging population base, and the criminal justice system. Theory, research, and action all play important roles at this gathering and often come together in individual talks.

Sessions are structured to ensure, to the degree possible, participation by both presenters and other participants. During each “dignilogue” panel, an extra chair is provided to be occupied by any non-presenter who wishes to offer a comment or question. A group ethic of respectful exchange frames the event. On topics as difficult as, say, the impact of required English education on the preservation of traditional languages in Africa, emotions may run strong. It may take an effort, at times, to keep certain expressions in check and to listen to others amid earnest discussion. Nevertheless, such attempts are far preferred to imposing a cloak of superficial dialogue that dodges hard topics, or allowing exchanges to disintegrate into angry barbs tossed back and forth. Overall, this conference does as good a job as any of facilitating respectful discussions on

24. This section is adapted from a blog post, David Yamada, *Dignity Work*, MINDING THE WORKPLACE (Dec. 10, 2012), <http://newworkplace.wordpress.com/2012/12/10/dignity-work-2/>, archived at <https://perma.cc/3TJ2-C7K7>.

25. *Welcome to Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies (HumanDHS)*, HUM. DIGNITY & HUMILIATION STUD., <http://www.humiliationstudies.org/> (last visited Feb. 14, 2015), archived at <http://perma.cc/9EAA-AVTX>.

difficult topics.

VI. GOOD FEELINGS

The main purpose of an academic conference is not to create and experience a “feel good” event. However, this does not mean we cannot (or should not) host gatherings that facilitate spirited, respectful dialogue and intellectual exchange, while embracing an ethic of fellowship that nurtures further connections and friendships. I hope that this brief essay has offered some ideas and inspiration for creating such events.