

OR, LOCKDOWN AND YOU – AN ONLINE GET-TOGETHER

Hula hoops (of the hard plastic variety), health, ‘thrivers’ guilt, introverts finally coming into their own – these are just some of the topics, expected and unexpected, to emerge from the WORAN online meeting ‘OR, Lockdown and You’, held on-line on 12th May.

The WORAN networking event due to be addressed by Dame Julia Buckingham was the first ORS event to be cancelled as the national response to COVID-19 began to take shape. Whilst venue and speaker were very flexible in shifting the date to much later in the year, WORAN felt the need for something more, to fill the lost opportunity for people to connect and share. Webinars are excellent learning platforms, but they don’t meet that need for two-way chat and that opportunity for serendipitous connection that physical meetings offer, and thus the idea for ‘OR, Lockdown and You’ was born.

This Zoom-based meeting had several purposes: to discuss issues for women in OR during the COVID emergency, and identify possible mitigating actions for individuals, WORAN, the OR Society, employers or the community as a whole; to give participants the chance to ‘meet up’ with colleagues in similar situations and share experiences; to pilot this new approach to building networks and connections; and, we hoped, to help each other during difficult times. These are not just women’s issues – they are issues for all of us, and everybody was welcome to join in the discussion – but we were particularly keen to make sure women’s voices were heard.

More than 40 people overcame challenges of technology, and work and domestic demands, to join in. A poll conducted at the start showed that our living circumstances covered the full range: people living on their own, those living with other independent adults, and those living with caring responsibilities. There was also a good spread across students, academic staff and practitioners.

We packed a lot into the 90-minute meeting. After an introduction from meeting chair Ruth Kaufman (a former president of the OR Society) came two scene-setting talks. Frances O’Brien, Chair of WORAN, described her own ‘lockdown journey’ with pictures of her life ‘before’ and ‘after’, split into work, family and social. Her talk struck a lot of chords with her audience, as she discussed the further blurring of already-blurred boundaries between work and home, and the importance of looking for ways of maintaining health and wellbeing for family (in Frances’s case, two teenage children) and self. If you want to know where hula hoops fit in, you can see the talk – and indeed, all plenary parts of the meeting - on the WORAN webpage. Frances concluded with pointing to aspects of the current situation that she hopes will persist as we move on, before handing over to Nicola Morrill, the OR Society’s Board Diversity Champion.

Nicola felt that for herself personally, there was much to be positive about in the current situation. She looked at lockdown through a number of different diversity lenses to shed light on who might benefit and suffer disproportionately. One of these lenses, which Frances also commented on, was the importance of understanding one’s place, and one’s colleagues’ positions, on the introversion/extroversion spectrum, and the associated risks and opportunities.

We then split into 8 different workshops, to discuss different aspects of the current situation. Some topics were prompted by contributors' personal experience, others by some of the reports that women's experience of lockdown is different from men's¹. They included managing remote teams, the difference between 'working from home' and 'trying to work whilst at home', and how OR people can best contribute.

The discussions foreshadowed the conclusions from the Resolution Foundation's research, published a fortnight later: that women with children have been more domestic responsibilities than men to the relative detriment of their own paid work.² Why? For the Resolution Foundation "Disentangling all of the different factors at play... is a complicated question and outside the scope of this report" and our event reached a similar conclusion. But whatever the causes, it is striking that the 'felt experience' of the people at the meeting lined up so closely with the research; and raises concerns about whether recent decades' improvements in the position of women in the workforce will be maintained.

Some other themes which emerged: were the importance of caring for one's own and one's family's wellbeing, the exposure of inequalities of all sorts, practical tips for making the best of the situation, and challenges for professional development, particularly for people in early stages of their careers who had less opportunity to experience face-to-face teaching or consultancy. The discussions were too wide-ranging to be captured here, but all the workshops were documented, and the complete list of outputs is now on the WORAN website. We hope that employers, managers and other OR people will find them useful in planning next steps and responses to the current circumstances.

The final part of the afternoon was a 5-minute 'random networking' session, aiming to replicate the serendipitous 'coffee queue' or other unplanned conversations that are part of the joy and benefits of physical events. Participants were invited to bring their choice of refreshment, and then randomly assigned to groups of three or four, for rapid introductions, descriptions of their current activities, and a request to share with their group their favourite desk stretch. This was an enjoyable and rewarding way to round off a stimulating afternoon.

As a result of feedback and reflection on the event, WORAN will be hosting monthly on-line meetings for the rest of the summer, varying the format and duration to try to provide a variety of support and interest to colleagues. We hope that many of you will be able to attend at least one, and maybe more. And we will be delighted to receive feedback and suggestions for further activities.

¹ this [analysis from the Fawcett Society](#); this article from [Nature](#); this item on journal submissions: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/may/12/womens-research-plummets-during-lockdown-but-articles-from-men-increase>

² <https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/BN290-Mothers-and-fathers-balancing-work-and-life-under-lockdown.pdf>