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Showcasing Health Psychology Postgraduate Research: Contemporary Theory and Methods

29th Annual PsyPAG Conference, Cardiff Metropolitan University, 23rd-25th July 2014

Health Psychology is a relatively novel field which brings together a wide range of approaches, methodologies and theories. The field has previously been dominated by theory-driven quantitative research, but important contributions have been made to the field by research using qualitative or mixed methods (O’Cathain, 2009). It is important to showcase the breadth of current health-related research conducted by postgraduates, as this research has very practical implications on policy, healthcare and prevention. In addition to this, there are a diverse range of postgraduates involved in this type of research, including Masters and Doctorate students, as well as trainees on courses accredited by the British Psychological Society (BPS).

Each year, the Psychology Postgraduate Affairs Group (PsyPAG) Conference Committee receives increasing numbers of submissions from postgraduates who are interested in the psychological processes of health, illness and healthcare. As the PsyPAG Division of Health Psychology representative for 2012-2014, I wanted to bring together these research interests and expertise by hosting a Health Psychology Symposium and a Health Psychology Keynote at the PsyPAG Annual Conference 2014. I was delighted that the Division of Health Psychology (DHP) recognised the value of showcasing Health Psychology postgraduate research and kindly agreed to sponsor the symposium and the keynote.

This year, the 29th PsyPAG Annual Conference 2014 was held at Cardiff Metropolitan University. Delegate demographics suggested that many were a member of the Division of Health Psychology. This was also demonstrated by accepted poster abstracts. For example, many of the posters presented at the conference were health-related, with research on blood transfusions, autism, osteoarthritis, alcohol misuse, chronic pain, sexual health, depression, learning disabilities and multiple sclerosis. I was also very grateful to the chair of the DHP, Professor Paul Bennett for providing such an engaging and popular Psychology keynote at the conference. Professor Bennett’s presentation focused on the need to shift from individual to systemic psychosocial interventions, with a very relevant focus on improving health in Wales.

Following the call for abstracts for the Health Psychology symposia, I received many excellent submissions from postgraduates studying a range of health-related topics. This led me to host two Health Psychology symposia at the conference, both of which proved very popular for delegates. Speakers in these sessions included those completing Masters and Doctorates, including those on BPS accredited courses, with a diverse range of health-related research interests. Within each symposia, speakers appeared to be using contemporary approaches and methods in their research to address real-world, health-related problems. For example, in her presentation, Emilia Trapasso from Liverpool John Moores University described how she is using semi-structured focused groups and grounded theory to explore children’s perceptions of obesity and healthy lifestyle choices. In her Masters research, Emilia is asking children to draw pictures of healthy and unhealthy meals and to describe why these are perceived in this

way. Emilia's research will provide a greater understanding of young children's perceptions of healthy lifestyles and the lifestyle choices that they make.

The methods used by speakers in their research were not only innovative, but challenging. For example, Kayleigh Nelson from Swansea University described how she is using joint interviewing in the context of prostate cancer. In her presentation, Kayleigh explained how joint interviewing is not only a relatively under-used method of data collection, but it is also difficult to implement. Kayleigh gave an interesting insight into the factors researchers should consider before conducting individual or joint interviews. Kayleigh's Doctoral research will provide a valuable perspective into how couples co-construct meaning and share their illness experience. Martine Robson from Aberystwyth University is also focusing on couples' experiences, but as they make lifestyle changes following diagnosis with coronary heart disease. In her presentation, Martine provided a fascinating insight into how couples manage these changes. For example, Martine explained how couples create changes that they can live with, such as reducing the intake of unhealthy foods rather than prohibiting them completely. Martine's Doctoral research will inform future support for those making lifestyle changes following diagnosis.

Many speakers were using contemporary theories to study the psychology of health and illness. For example, Salvatore Di Martino from the University of Naples Federico II proposed that researchers need to take an inter-disciplinary approach to understand health and well-being. In his presentation, Salvatore suggested that this requires a combination of both top down and bottom up factors, including contributions from a number of disciplines. Salvatore's Doctoral research will provide a new outlook on happiness and well-being, with a focus on the role of context, justice and morality. Jin Zhou from Edge Hill University also provided an innovative view on understanding alcohol consumption in terms of identity and group membership. In her presentation, Jin gave an engaging insight into the social influences and group-level processes that regulate drinking behaviour. Jin's Doctoral research will uncover how social identity shapes alcohol consumption in certain social groups, including the implications this has for well-being and development (Zhou, O'Brien, & Heim, 2014).

I was fortunate to be able to present my own research in one of these sessions. My Doctoral research also takes an inter-disciplinary approach to investigate drinking behaviour. In my presentation, I suggested that taking behaviour which occurs in an external world back to be explained in terms of internal, psychological determinants overlooks the unmediated and direct transactions between brain, body and environment. Instead, researchers should engage in conceptual and methodological retooling in order to overcome prevailing dichotomies between what is deemed to be qualitative-quantitative, objective-subjective and psychological-environmental. For example, I proposed that subjectivity could actually be re-defined and used as a tool to investigate how an individual's relationship with their environment promotes and inhibits opportunity to consume alcohol. In turn, I proposed that these ideas could have important implications for how researchers understand health and prevent harms in society.

I was also very impressed with the discussions that were generated after each presentation between delegates and speakers. This included specialist topics, such as therapygenetics. For example, Moritz Herle from King's College London highlighted the importance of looking at individual and environmental influences. In his fascinating presentation, Moritz described how therapygenetics can identify genetic markers associated with responses to psychological interventions, such as exposure-based Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. Moritz explained that, by focusing on these gene-environment

interactions, researchers could better explain anxiety disorders. Moritz's Masters research will have implications for understanding the causes and treatment of common mental health problems.

The research presented in these sessions also had important practical implications. For example, Daniel Herron from Keele University explained how he is focusing on the experiences of those with intellectual disabilities that are living with dementia. In his engaging presentation, Daniel explained how little research explores the experiences of living with dementia, particularly for those with intellectual disabilities. Daniel's Doctoral research provides an insight into these experiences, with unique contributions from family members and carers. This research will provide implications for how existing support systems can best be utilised to provide holistic care and support (Herron & Priest, 2013). Yvonne Whelan from Birkbeck, University of London also provided an interesting overview of her research, which focuses on distinct developmental pathways from maternal to adolescent depression. In her presentation, Yvonne focused on the unique contribution of irritability and the potential that this research has for prevention. Yvonne's Doctoral research will also be crucial in informing both future research and evidence-informed treatment approaches.

Overall, the Health Psychology symposia enabled a diverse range of postgraduate research to be showcased and brought together under one broad theme. This research was of exceptionally high-quality, with many speakers using innovative theories and methods. I hope that future conferences and events will be able to showcase the valuable work that postgraduates do in this area. Sadly, I have now completed my two year tenure as the Division of Health Psychology PsyPAG representative. However, I know that the PsyPAG Annual Conference will continue to be an encouraging and supportive platform for all postgraduate research and particularly that conducted by postgraduates interested in the psychological processes of health, illness and healthcare.

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