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# Empowering Early Career Researchers: Insights and Reflections from the 2024 CREATE Workshop and EHPS Conference

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## Abstract

In 2024 the CREATE workshop and EHPS conference brought the five of us to sunny Cascais in Portugal. Receiving CREATE and Conference grants gave us, as early-career researchers, the opportunity to participate in the CREATE pre-conference workshop “Empowering Collaboration: Patient and Public Involvement in Health Research”, led by Dr. Anna Levke Brütt and Dr. Elspeth Mathie. Their powerful insights sparked new ideas on integrating patient voices into research and was just the start of the informative and motivating conference programme. Throughout the conference we made new friends, connected with future collaborators, and gained fresh perspectives to fuel our work. It was an unforgettable experience that boosted our careers and deepened our passion for health psychology.

**Key words:** Early-career, CREATE, Professional development, Patient and public involvement

## Introduction

The 2024 CREATE workshop and annual European Health Psychology Society (EHPS) conference were held in Cascais, a sunny seaside town on the Portuguese Riviera. The five of us, as early career researchers, were thankful to be able to attend this year, having been awarded CREATE Workshop grants (Eva Dichiser, Laura Gördes, Emma Tack, & Rachael Yelder), and a Conference grant (Eleonoora Hintsa).

This year’s workshop, titled “*Empowering Collaboration: Patient and Public Involvement (PPI) in Health Research*”, was a rewarding opportunity for us to engage in meaningful discussions with peers and experienced scientists. The workshop’s leaders, Dr Anna Levke Brütt (University Medical Center Hamburg-Eppendorf, Germany) and Dr Elspeth Mathie (University of Hertfordshire, United Kingdom), shared valuable insights and examples from their projects. In this way, the what, why, when, and how of involvement were addressed. The workshop sparked new ideas and offered practical guidance for incorporating and enhancing patient and public voices in research, making outcomes more meaningful for both research teams and the populations we’re working with. A key takeaway was the importance of involving patients and the public early in the research process to ensure their insights shape research priorities and methodologies from the outset. Additionally, the workshop highlighted practical strategies for sustaining engagement throughout a project, tools for evaluating PPI, and tips for involving ‘hard-to-reach’ populations. The workshop emphasized how PPI enriches the research process and increases the meaningfulness of results, leading to scientific advancement and the empowerment of people involved.

Beyond the sessions, the workshop created a welcoming space to exchange thoughts on our individual projects and to hear from others facing similar challenges. The social activities, including a guided tour of Cascais and a group dinner, made it easy to strengthen our connections with fellow Early Career Researchers, building lasting professional relationships and a sense of community.

Most of us were first-time attendees of the conference, and the 2024 CREATE workshop marked our first introduction to the EHPS community itself. The CREATE workshop provided an ideal starting point for engaging with the health psychology community. Learning from experts in the field helped us develop skills that will advance our careers and increase the relevance of our research in this fast-growing discipline. Meeting other researchers at a similar stage in their academic journeys created a sense of belonging from the outset, which made it easier to network and feel more at home throughout the main conference.

## Scientific program

The scientific program at the EHPS 2024 conference offered a wide range of sessions, including keynote talks, state-of-the-art (SOTA) sessions, symposia, roundtables, oral presentations, and poster sessions. This variety gave participants the chance to engage with cutting-edge research relevant to our ongoing work, sparked new ideas and expanded our understanding of health psychology. From exploring topics outside our immediate research fields to deepening our knowledge in specific areas, the program provided a rich platform for learning and inspiration. If anything, the challenge was simply choosing between so many compelling sessions.

The breadth of topics ensured we could attend sessions closely linked to our own research. These sessions provided insights into the latest findings and new approaches to study design and raised important future questions that need further investigation.

Participating in symposia and poster sessions, in particular, gave us opportunities to engage in scientific discussions related to our fields of study. Some of us also had the chance to present our ongoing work as oral presentations, whether in symposia or shorter flashlight talks. Presenting not only gave us the opportunity to disseminate our research but also to develop professional communication skills. Most importantly, it helped us form and strengthen connections with researchers from around the world who showed genuine interest in our work.

The scientific program also included intriguing sessions outside our immediate research areas, helping us develop a more comprehensive understanding of health psychology as a whole. These sessions highlighted the diverse roles health psychology can play in promoting health and sustainability, as well as recent advances and key challenges in the field. Noteworthy sessions included the roundtable discussion “*Protecting pluralism or committing to consensus? Risks and opportunities of ontologies in behavioural sciences*” (chaired by Maya Braun), which explored the complexities of terminology and its operationalization in health psychology. Sessions such as “*Bio-psych indicators*” (chaired by Ryan Rhodes) and “*Stress and coping*” (chaired by Daniel Powell) offered refreshing and innovative biopsychological perspectives on health psychology. Symposia like “*The use of Artificial Intelligence to collect, analyze, and generate qualitative data in health psychology*” (chaired by Felix Naughton & Paulina Bondaronek) and “*Computational modelling to enhance health psychology theories: methods and applications*” (chaired by Olga Perski) highlighted exciting new ways to leverage technology to enhance research efficiency.

The keynote talks delivered by Prof. Amanda Daley, Prof. Paschal Sheeran, Prof. Sónia Dias, and Prof. Jeremy Grimshaw were particularly inspiring. Each speaker made unique contributions that complemented one another, exploring different aspects of health psychology science and its real-world applications. Prof. Sónia Dias emphasized the critical role of socio-behavioural sciences in shaping public policy and improving the effectiveness of interventions in real-world settings. Prof. Jeremy Grimshaw expanded on how scientific interventions can be better applied across various contexts, using implementation science as a framework. Meanwhile, Prof. Amanda Daley gave a practical example with her work on “*Snacktivity*,” illustrating how health professionals can promote physical activity through small, manageable interventions. While Dias, Daley, and Grimshaw focused on improving the application of research in practice, Prof. Paschal Sheeran presented a novel approach to research itself. He framed current challenges as “tasks” that require more precise descriptions of behaviour change, discussed how we can better evaluate intervention effectiveness, and explored how Artificial Intelligence might be used to generate qualitative research data.

Finally, beyond the content of the sessions, the scientific program offered valuable opportunities for ‘incidental’ learning through observation. This included learning to effectively communicate scientific findings in different formats, from keynotes to short oral presentations and posters, asking insightful questions, and engaging in scientific debates.

## Networking

Transitioning from the formal sessions, networking opportunities were equally enriching. As an early career researcher attending the EHPS conference for the first time, **Meet the Expert (MTE)** sessions are an incredible opportunity to connect with established figures like Prof. Amanda Daley, Paschal Sheeran, and Jeremy Grimshaw. It’s not just about hearing their insights—it’s about sitting down with them in a relaxed environment and digging into shared research interests.

One of the most memorable and entertaining events of the EHPS conference was the ‘**Challenge Night**’, held in a lively bar and packed with researchers across all career stages. Several well-established senior researchers and younger fellows took the stage to share honest and often humorous stories of academic missteps, embarrassing moments, and unexpected setbacks. All these stories were met with laughter and applause, creating a relaxed and supportive environment where everyone could relate to the ups and downs of academic life. The mix of personal stories made the evening not only entertaining but also a powerful reminder that no one is immune to mistakes, no matter how accomplished they are. Their vulnerability and openness made even the most senior researchers feel more approachable. For us, it was reassuring to see that failure is part of the learning process, even in the most successful careers.

The **conference dinner** at EHPS feels like the perfect way to unwind and have fun after a packed day of sessions. It’s a chance to step away from the formal setting and enjoy spending time with people – whether they’re fellow early career researchers or more established experts. The relaxed atmosphere makes it much easier to strike up casual conversations, whether it’s about shared research interests or just chatting about life outside of work. It’s the perfect opportunity to connect with people more informally, where the pressure of presentations is off, and we can share some laughs over good food. It’s the setting where real connections are made – collaborations might spark, and friendships can form in ways that don’t always happen during the day.

Within the EHPS, five Special Interest Groups (SIGs) enable individuals with shared research interests to connect, exchange ideas, and establish potential collaborations. Some of these SIGs held meetings during the conference, such as the Habit SIG. Here, participants worked in small groups and generated various exciting joint project ideas as part of a seed funding competition. The opportunity to collaborate with experts in the field is especially beneficial for young researchers like us, as it supports both our scientific network and our personal development.

## Conclusions

Participating in the CREATE workshop and the EHPS conference was an invaluable experience that enriched our professional growth and personal development. It provided us with fresh perspectives and innovative ideas that will fuel our current and future research projects. Beyond the knowledge gained, we built meaningful connections within the health psychology community, expanding our professional network in exciting new directions. We’re deeply thankful for the Conference and CREATE grants, which made these opportunities possible.



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