

## original article

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## EHPS conference report

## Meet the Expert: Past experience and future plans

*By Yael Benyamini and Evie Kirana, on behalf of the EHPS Executive Committee*

Health psychology is a relatively new field. In the last decades, research advances were not only rapid but also of great clinical significance. In order for the field to evolve, there is an evident need to support the development of abundant human resources and encourage scientists to actively contribute to this research field.

In this respect, the EHPS Executive Committee launched a new initiative last year named "Meet the Expert". The aim was to assist young scientists to improve the effectiveness of their current and future research activities by providing them a unique opportunity to consult with an expert in the field.

The group of experts were established research leaders with numerous scientific publications and outstanding academic teachers in health psychology worldwide. Five experts, Profs., Michael Diefenbach (USA), Marie Johnston (UK), Hannah McGee (Ireland), Herman Schaalma (Netherlands), and Wayne Velicer (USA) were selected between those with major teaching and research experience, and agreed to facilitate the initiative. The above group of experts proposed a very broad range of health psychology domains for consultation; cancer, disability, risk perception, ageing, theory and measurement were only a few of the domains.

The participants included 17 young scientists from Canada, Cyprus, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, Turkey, and the UK – a truly international team of experts and participants! Even a quick look at the application forms showed what an energetic, talented and ambitious group of people had signed up to participate, many of them close to the end of their PhD or recently graduated, at a crucial junction in their lives, eager to hear feedback and ideas about their research and their future options. Many of the participants came from countries in which health psychology is not well established and were looking forward to this opportunity for personal contact with experienced researchers from around Europe and the US. Even those from countries with a longer history of research and practice in health psychology, welcomed the opportunity to meet in person a distinguished scholar from outside their university and discuss their research. Many of them mentioned that they experienced barriers in their research, which they believed would be diminished through contacts with a wider international network.

The consultations were 30-minute one-on-one sessions that took place on the morning before ►



## EHPS conference report

### Meet the Expert: Past experience and future plans (cont'd)

the opening of the annual conference in Maastricht. Participants were asked to send in relevant information in advance and the experts had studied this information carefully and thus made optimal use of the meeting time. The consultation aimed to respond to the needs of each participant and included the provision of advice on:

- ▶ research perspectives and ideas (in order to encourage research originality),
- ▶ issues relevant to study design (e.g. research tools selection and outcome measures),
- ▶ how to combine clinical practice with research and specifically, how to develop interventions and combine this with research.
- ▶ important papers or books (where this was relevant, experts mailed the participants additional materials upon their return home).
- ▶ how to apply for and obtain funding.
- ▶ career and networking opportunities.

Many of the participants walked into the sessions shy and a bit tense ("How am I going to spend 30 minutes with the famous Professor so and so...?!) but all walked out smiling and relaxed. Anyone who walked by the meeting rooms that morning, could have witnessed scenes such as someone walking out of a session, holding her head as if it's about to burst from all the information she had received, and muttering to herself: "This woman knows so much!"

Feedback collected more systematically showed that these sessions fulfilled participants' expectations and they found the sessions to be very useful, of high quality and optimal length. Many participants added their impressions from this experience:

- ▶ 'The atmosphere was very friendly'
- ▶ 'I received some feedback on my research and a couple of hints how to improve it.'
- ▶ 'A truly positive experience; I got plenty of food for thought'
- ▶ 'A great way of discussing your ambitions'.
- ▶ 'I am glad to be a participant in this event and thank you very much for providing this opportunity to me.'
- ▶ 'I got some advice and also it was inspiring'
- ▶ 'This meeting moved my work a few steps further on.'

- ▶ 'Keep it up; it's a great opportunity for researchers to talk to other leading researchers in their field.'

Of course there is always room for improvement. Feedback from both participants and experts had led us to the decision to focus in the future mainly on research advice. We will also consider small group meetings, depending on the issues raised in advance by the applicants. We will ask participants to be even more specific in defining the issues to be raised in this consultation.

#### Plans for the coming year

Therefore, in light of the positive feedback, we are excited to announce that we will continue with this initiative in order to provide young researchers with the opportunity to consult with leading scientists in their field of interest.

A carefully selected panel of key scientists, willing to pass on their knowledge and experience will be there in order to:

- ▶ assist young researchers in planning a research project;
- ▶ provide young scientists with information and resources responding to the needs of their current research work. Participants may be provided with useful materials and tools, as well as with advice concerning the overcoming of specific obstacles they may be facing;
- ▶ provide guidance for participants' research perspectives;
- ▶ provide young researchers with the opportunity of long term networking opportunities.

The event will take place again on the morning on the opening day of the conference in Bath. Evie Kirana (Greece), who participated in "Meet the Expert" last year, has joined the organizing team and we both hope that this will be a success again. ■

**We invite you all to take part in this effort – as experts or participants!**