workshop report

Create 2009 report: "Advancing the science of behaviour change: methods and theories"

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The largest ever CREATE workshop took place in the historic city of Pisa over three days before the EHPS conference. The workshop had received an unprecedented number of applicants. This may have been due to the prospect of a week in the Italian sunshine, but it was more likely due to the highly valuable content of the workshop, overseen by its three world-class facilitators.

Create 2009 in Pisa

Professor Susan Michie, Dr Falko Sniehotta and Professor David French, all experts in the field of developing and evaluating behaviour change interventions, put together a programme of presentations and group activities. The learning environment was informal and interactive, encouraging lively discussions of the content and providing the opportunity to pose questions to the first-rate facilitators. The workshop was organised by CREATE's executive committee, Amelie Wiedemann, Stephan Dombrowski, Jana Richert, Natalie Mallach and Nelli Hankonen. All are early-career researchers and the group did a brilliant job of managing both the workshop and the social programme.

The focus of the workshop was thematically similar to that of the conference: the translation of knowledge into interventions. Specifically, this year's CREATE workshop aimed to increase understanding of the principles of good science within health psychology, applying health psychology theory to intervention development and evaluation and methods for testing and developing theory. These issues are at the core of health psychology and these issues were discussed within the context of the participants' own work.

The workshop content was structured around the MRC guidelines for developing and evaluating complex interventions (Craig, Dieppe, Macintyre, Michie, Nazareth & Petticrew, 2008). These guidelines view development of behaviour change interventions as a process involving the stages of development (including the preclinical "theory" phase), feasibility and piloting, evaluation and implementation.

The development phase involves identifying the evidence base and selecting appropriate theory. Methods for developing a theory-based intervention and reviewing evidence were discussed. It is necessary to assess the evidence base to discover which components of interventions work and why. This is hindered by poor reporting of intervention content: while guidelines exist for reporting of interventions (e.g. the CONSORT statement; Moher, Schulz & Altman, 2001), identifying intervention content from published journal articles is a difficult task. This issue led to Abraham and Michie (2008) developing a theory-linked taxonomy of 26 behaviour change techniques, which has since been extended to 40 techniques. The taxonomy provides a useful tool for identifying effective techniques in interventions, process evaluation of interventions (e.g. Michie, Hardeman, Prevost, Taylor & Kinmonth, 2008) and could be used to facilitate better reporting of interventions. One of the many group activities was an exercise in coding intervention descriptions using the taxonomy. ►

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We found that it was much easier to do so from a protocol, providing practical experience the difficulty identifying intervention content.

The importance of theory was a major focus of the workshop, as it is a crucial aspect of good science in health psychology. In particular, the importance of using theory in developing interventions was discussed. A coherent theoretical basis is a crucial aspect of an intervention: theory-based interventions are more likely to be successful than those which do not use theory (Albarracin, Gilette, Earl, Glasman, Durantini & Ho, 2005). Several different approaches can be used to develop a theory-based intervention, such as intervention mapping (Kok, Schaalma, Ruiter, van Empelen & Brug, 2004), using a theory which explains how to change behaviour (e.g. Social Cognitive Theory, Bandura, 1997; Self Regulation Theory, Carver & Scheier, 1998) or modifying theoretical mediators of behaviour.

The practical issues of developing and evaluating interventions were worked through interactively beside the conceptual points. Given the interactive nature of the workshop, at every step we were given the opportunity to discuss the issues raised within the context of our own work. Many of the group were working on intervention studies, while others were undertaking theoretical work. The workshop gave us the opportunity to solve problems and get advice from others in a similar situation as well as the expert facilitators.

One of the purposes of the CREATE group is to provide a support network for early career researchers, offering opportunities to meet others from Europe with similar research interests. This was easily achieved through both the workshop content itself, which included a session where we informed one another's intervention design, and through the social programme. It's not often that I get to discuss behaviour change over a glass (or three) of wine! CREATE was valuable for those within the later stages of their PhDs and those like myself who have just started. I left Pisa with my brain buzzing with ideas for directions and I now have met dozens of people who can provide me with advice. Because of this wonderful experience, I look forward to CREATE's 2010 workshop in Romania, and I would recommend it to other early career researchers.

References

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