

EHPS Conference

Impressions from the 19th EHPS Conference, Galway, Ireland

by Pepijn van Empelen



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A spectacular number of people attended the 19th Conference of the European Health Psychology Society held from 31 August to 3 September in Galway, Ireland. The Conference was held in the Arts Millennium Building and The Arts/Science Building of the National University of Ireland, Galway, and hosted by the Department of Psychology. The Spanish Bar of Brennan's Yard hotel proved to be a good initial starting point to meet and greet new and familiar EHPS faces, on the evening before the start of the 19th EHPS Conference. The Conference was started with Dordán, a traditional Irish music group.

This year's programme featured 237 oral presentations and 440 poster presentations, as such providing a diverse overview of what health psychology has to offer at present. In addition, four keynote speakers provided an overview of past successes and future challenges, with a mixture of views on psychology, physiology, health and well-being.

The conference provided a very enjoyable scientific and social programme. Let me first start by highlighting some of the impressions of the conference days. By no means will this be an objective view, simply because of the impossibility to cover all topics and different views being presented within those approximate 700 presentations.

The 19th EHPS conference showed that health psychologists have started moving beyond motivation in order to examine action processes of goal attainment. This focus is logical, realising that in general we do not focus on one-off behaviours, but rather on behaviours that are recurring and need to be maintained overtime. In addition, in her keynote Mary Johnston pointed out the need for consensus on what are unique factors in order to reduce the wild increase in constructs that are virtually identical.

Different views were presented on how to examine the complexity of behaviour. One of the approaches people have taken is the focus on stage models. The symposium on stage models showed that there is an ongoing quest for the ideal, testable and measurable stage theory. Others have focused on intention-behaviour discrepancies without specifically suggesting a stage type of approach. Charles Abraham pointed out the need to focus on multiple behaviours instead of single behaviours, the enactment of intentions being more a relative function of priorities rather than absolute assessments. In addition, he proposed examining preparatory intentions besides goal intentions in order to explain (action sequences of) behaviours. In our study, we provided evidence for the suggestion that goal intention, although being a prerequisite, is not enough in ensuring prepared actions, but rather that action-specific cognitions predict preparatory behaviours (of condom use) beyond goal intentions.

Frederick Gibbons gave a nice overview of the prototype/willingness model, a dual process model, that points out that (young) people may not always chose the reasoned path, but rather react to opportunities that arise. Consequently, people may be willing to engage in risk taking behaviour without having planned it. Behavioural willingness depends on (a) the context (risk opportunity), (b) (lack of) experience, (c) affect (mood state), (d) disposition (impulsivity).

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Opening reception



Impressions from Galway

The symposium provided evidence that the perceived similarity of others may be very important in explaining both reasoned and reactive actions, as well as direct behavior.

Alternatively, the symposium on self-control examined when people are likely to be in control or when they lose control. Hugo Alberts showed that people might maintain their self-control when persistence is triggered. In the same symposium it was shown that making people aware of their goals being threatened might have a positive effect on self-control. Falko Sniehotta and Benjamin Schüz showed that action control is a vital condition of behaviour change and maintenance, simultaneously introducing the funny phenomenon 'dental floss residual'.

At the symposium also a diversity of interventions was mentioned, both small scale interventions and larger implementation studies. Interestingly, a number of seemingly simple intervention methods provided strong effects, and a lot of interest was given to self-regulatory interventions, capturing methods such as motivational interviewing, implementation intentions, self-monitoring diaries and self-help guides. In his keynote lecture on emotional writing, James Pennebaker showed that simple interventions might have very favourable effects, actually providing an emotion self-regulation strategy. Very impressive were the results presented a year after the smoking ban in Ireland, showing that legislation is also a very important intervention tool. Emmer Shelley provided evidence that the smoking ban was widely accepted by both smokers and non-smokers, and resulted in a decrease in smoking prevalence.

Points I did not capture but were certainly of interest were related to examining program fidelity, individual differences, (in-) direct contextual effects, and the need for both small scale testing of intervention methods, as well as their implementation on a larger scale. As Pennebaker pointed out we have to sell our products better, and this means both showing what works and why it works, and providing evidence on a larger scale (in terms of size and time period). In that sense it is also good to see that more sophisticated designs and methods are currently used to test models and examine intervention effects.

The scientific program was very worthwhile, but so were the social events that were arranged. The city of Galway proved to be an excellent place providing beautiful scenery in terms of its location at sea and the river Corrib, in addition providing a lively and friendly atmosphere with a mixture of good food, drinks and music. The receptions at the NUI Galway were a good moment for socializing, while enjoying the drinks and food offered. Also the lunches gave an opportunity for some discussions and the pretty good weather provided an opportunity for an outside 'picnic'. The Conference dinner ended vibrantly with a lot of people dancing until the band stopped playing. At the Closing ceremony poster prizes were awarded and some insights were given into what the 20th EHPS Conference might bring in Warsaw, Poland.

In conclusion, the 19th EHPS conference will be memorable for its scientific interest, the good organisation, and its social events, while, when looking ahead, the 20th EHPS Conference promises to be interesting and an important marking point for the EHPS.

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