

CREATE visiting scholar grant report

Project title: Social identities as facilitators of healthy eating.

Visiting scholar: Kasia Banas, Centre for Population Health Sciences, University of Edinburgh, United Kingdom

Senior academic visited: Professor John de Wit, National Centre in HIV Social Research, University of New South Wales, Australia

Duration of the research visit: April-June 2011

The CREATE Visiting Scholar Grant gave me the opportunity to visit Professor John de Wit at the National Centre in HIV Social Research (NCHSR) in Sydney. Professor de Wit and I worked together five years ago, when I was in the final year of my undergraduate course at University College Utrecht.

I found out about the CREATE grants from the European Health Psychology Society's website. When I read the information about the conditions and requirements of the Visiting Scholar Grant, I immediately thought about applying for it and using it to cover the cost of a flight ticket to Sydney. The limited funding available at the University of Edinburgh would not allow me to go for a research visit to Australia, but I felt that with the help from CREATE, I would be able to go. I approached Professor de Wit with this idea, and he was very enthusiastic. We agreed that in order for the research visit to fit our schedules, it should take place between April and June. With this timing in mind, we started exchanging ideas about a potential project.

Professor de Wit is a social health psychologist, and while his current research focus is on sexual health, he has worked and published extensively in other areas of health psychology, including risk communication, eating, drug use and vaccination uptake. I am a social psychologist interested in the concept of social identity, and how social identities influence people's health and well-being. The topics I have previously studied include role of racial identity in buffering the negative effects of racial discrimination on health, or the beneficial effects of social identity complexity. The focus of my PhD is on the role of social identities in healthy behaviour. Professor de Wit gave me a lot of freedom in choosing the research topic, but it seemed to me that we both believed that identity-related factors are often somewhat overlooked in health psychological research, and that it would be useful to do some more work in this area.

Our first idea was to look at the role of social identities in sexual risk taking. I prepared a research proposal in which I suggested a review of the existing literature on the use of identity-related concepts in studies of sexual health. I also wanted to carry out a survey to look at the relationship between identity-related variables identified by the literature review, and self-reported sexual risk-taking. Though I still find this issue fascinating, after some deliberation and discussion with Professor de Wit and my supervisor in Edinburgh, Dr John Forbes, I decided to abandon this idea in favour of a simple experimental study that could be the starting point for my PhD. Thus, I asked myself the question: what is the most basic thing that I would like to know about the role of social identity in health? I realised that I wanted to know which identities were relevant to health at all, and how social identity could be used in health promotion campaigns.

Applying for the grant involved writing a short research proposal and a letter of motivation, and sending along letters of support from both my current supervisor, Dr John Forbes and my Australian host, Professor John de Wit. I needed some support from the administrative staff as well, and I have to say that everyone at both institutions was very helpful. I sent the documents and was delighted to learn, a few weeks later, that I was awarded the grant.

At this point, I started looking at flight ticket deals, and in early December I finally bought my tickets to Sydney. I decided to work at the NCHSR for two months, and stay in Australia for two more weeks, to give myself the chance to travel and sightsee. Both my supervisors agreed to this arrangement.

Also my research plans became more concrete, and I decided that the time spent in Sydney would be a good opportunity to start examining the relationship between social identities and healthy eating. I had the intuition that eating, which is an inherently social activity, would be greatly influenced by social identities- potentially through social norms, but also perhaps through other mechanisms. Other than my intuition, I was also guided by the work of Daphna Oyserman on Identity-Based Motivation (Oyserman, Fryberg & Yoder, 2007). Oyserman claims that people are motivated to do things that they perceive as congruent with their social identities, and they are reluctant to engage in activities that other group members would potentially disapprove of. Oyserman tested her ideas by looking at health-related cognitions among members of ethnic minorities in the United States. She found that many healthy behaviours are perceived as typical for the White and middle class population, and that this may be a reason why many members of ethnic minorities or low-income social groups do not respond to health promotion campaigns. I was eager to see if similar effects were present among other social groups. My hope was that some social groups would encourage healthy behaviour, and would contribute to better health of their members.

While I was planning my journey and researching accommodation options, it turned out that my parents had an old friend in Sydney, who offered to pick me up from the airport and host me for the first two weeks, while I would be looking for a room of my own. I gratefully accepted the offer, and the thought of having someone introduce me to Australian life made me a little less nervous.

With lots of research ideas in mind, and an arranged place to stay for the first weeks, I hopped on the plane to Sydney. I was a little bit unsure about how I would take a 24-hour flight, but it turned out to be a really pleasant experience. I enjoyed my companion, the food, and the in-flight entertainment. After arrival I gave myself a few days to recover from the jetlag, but my main tasks were to start my work at the NCHSR and to find a room. Both tasks turned out to be relatively easy, mostly thanks to the friendly and helpful people whom I met in Sydney. I found a room on the second day of my stay, and starting to feel at home at the NCHSR also took me no time at all.

The first major step in my research project was to obtain ethics approval for the empirical studies I was about to carry out. In order to do that, I needed to submit a detailed proposal of the studies, together with all study materials, at the end of the first week of my stay. All the thinking done in advance became really handy, and I received a lot of help from Professor de Wit and other members of staff at the Centre. I obtained ethics approval a couple of weeks after submitting the application, and I was able to start data collection on schedule.

Professor de Wit and I decided that my project would look at the relationship between social identities and healthy eating among female university students. We agreed that I would conduct three studies: two descriptive pilots, and one experimental study. The pilot studies were designed to give me a grasp of the identities that were relevant to students in Australia- having come from Europe, I did not want to assume that student identities in Australia would be similar. In the first pilot, I asked nine female students to list social identities that they possessed, and to mark those that they believed influenced their eating. Out of all the identities listed by participants, I chose to include seven most popular in the second pilot study. These identities were: student, female, Australian, family, religious, sports-team, and student societies identity. In the second pilot study, I asked 30 female students about the seven most popular identities: how important each of these identities was to them, and whether or not it influenced their eating. On the basis of these two pilot studies I was able to identify two social identities that were endorsed by most female students, and that influenced eating behaviour: family and female identity.

The main experimental study was designed to test the hypothesis that increasing the salience of social identities that are associated with healthy eating will increase healthy eating intentions and behaviour. I recruited 186 female students and randomly assigned them to one of three conditions: family-identity-salient, female-identity-salient, and personal-identity-salient (this was used as a control condition). To manipulate identity salience, I asked participants a series of questions about one of the identities. After this manipulation, participants in the female-identity-salient condition were expected to see themselves more as women, and participants in the family-identity-salient condition more as family members, compared to the personal-identity-salient condition.

In the study, participants were asked to report their intentions about eating more healthy food and eating fewer snacks in the future. To measure healthy eating behaviour, at the end of the study I offered participants the choice of an apple (healthy choice) or a snack-pack of two Oreo biscuits (unhealthy choice), and recorded their decision.

Data collection for the three studies took only two weeks. One of the factors that greatly facilitated data collection was the availability of two touchscreen kiosks which I was able to place in a busy area on campus. The kiosks meant that participants could complete the study outdoors, without having to book an appointment, and that I was able to reach large numbers of students on their way to lunch or to the library. It also meant that participants' responses saved straight on the computer, saving me time on data entry. This mode of data collection would not have been possible in Edinburgh- it simply rains too often!

The results supported one of our hypotheses: increasing the salience of both family and female identity led to reports of more healthy eating intentions. Interestingly, we found an opposite effect on actual eating behaviour: increasing the salience of personal identity was associated with choosing an apple more often than Oreo biscuits. While we are really happy about finding support for the first hypothesis, we are still looking for an explanation for the ironic effect on eating behaviour.

A draft write-up of this study was ready before I left Sydney, and some of the ideas and results were already presented at a poster session at the Summer Institute on Bounded Rationality in Berlin. Professor the Wit and I are currently in the process of designing follow-up studies and planning a potential publication involving the study carried out in May.

All in all, this was a very fruitful visit. We designed and carried out a study that now forms the basis of my PhD, and that inspired a lot of thinking about the potential mechanisms in which social identities may influence healthy behaviour. We are very keen to discover other identities that may play a role in this process, and other behaviours that could be affected. We would like the results of this study and its follow-ups to become useful to people who design health promotion campaigns.

While I was sad to leave Sydney in June, I hope that I will be able to come back in the second or third year of my PhD. Other than working on this study, Professor de Wit and I started collaborating on a couple of other projects, and we communicate on a regular basis.

At the end I would like to express my gratitude to CREATE for making this research visit possible. I feel that I learned a lot from Professor de Wit and his colleagues, but also from my participants. I am a little more knowledgeable about the Australian culture and values, and of course about Australian identity. I have come back home full of inspiration and new ideas.