

Synergy: past, present, and future

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With the 34th EHPS conference going online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was all hands on deck to set up interesting online meetings for our EHPS members. As the annual Synergy Expert Meeting (EM) needed to be cancelled, the Synergy board decided to organise a Synergy showcase event instead. The event aimed to present Synergy to those unfamiliar with the EHPS sub-division, to reunite those who previously participated in EMs or served on the organising board, and to discuss suggestions and ideas for shaping future directions of Synergy. We had the pleasure of welcoming five amazing speakers: Prof. Marie Johnston, Prof. Martin Hagger, Prof. Anne Marie Plass, Dr Felix Naughton, and Dr Elaine Toomey, who are all previous Synergy board members, EM facilitators, and/or attendees of EMs. Their talks revolved around Synergy's past and future, and how participation has benefited both facilitators and attendees professionally as well as personally.

Synergy was founded in 2002, when CREATE members who had graduated from their PhDs felt that the EHPS lacked a platform for mid to late career researchers. The annual CREATE workshops are about learning from people, while Synergy meetings would be focussed on learning and collaborating with people, consequently moving

specific health psychology topics forward. Annual two- or three-day pre-conference EMs (called Synergy Workshops at the time) were chosen as the means to accomplish this aim. From 2002 to 2008, Synergy EMs were organised by two local organisers. Then in 2009, during the winter meeting in Utrecht, the Synergy board was founded. The board currently consists of a chair, a secretary, a treasurer, an evaluation and dissemination officer, a grant and liaison officer, an engagement officer, and a local organiser; jointly working together to ensure that annual Synergy EMs are well prepared and run smoothly.

The EM facilitators are members of the EHPS community chosen to facilitate a meeting on a topic of their expertise which is relevant to the EHPS community. The Synergy board provides the EM facilitators with insights from previous years, however, facilitators get free reign on how they want to shape the meeting, depending on the chosen topic. Assembling 10-25 experts (where expert is defined as someone who has at least some expertise and experience on the given topic) for two full days provides a unique opportunity to move the field forward by discussing key theoretical, operational, and methodological shortcomings of current and previous research, to identify salient gaps in the literature, to formulate possible guidelines for good practice, and to determine priority areas for future research. It is an opportunity for the EM participants to think outside of the box and away from silos we get so easily caught up in in our busy, daily lives. A technique often used by facilitators to structure the meeting is the nominal groups approach, which includes small-group discussions, voting and other

activities, to reach consensus. However, with all these experts involved, occasionally the only consensus possible is agreeing to disagree. Every year we aim to publish a post-EM report in the *European Health Psychologist* (i.e., Kassavou et al, 2015; Chittem, 2016; Bull, 2018; Hagger et al, 2019; Brown, 2020), and a consensus statement, guidelines, or state-of-the-art overview on the topic in the EHPS journals, i.e., *Health Psychology Review* or *Psychology & Health* (i.e., Hagger et al, 2016; Kwasnicka et al, 2020). We hope that these publications will guide future research and its application in the relevant field.

In the future, Synergy aims to additionally organise online initiatives. In the mentor scheme "Meet the Synergy Expert", Synergy will be collaborating with CREATE to match early career researchers (ECRs) with later career researchers to collaborate on topics of joint interest. Once this mentorship is initiated, these dyads can meet online and, hopefully in 2022, in-person at the EHPS conference. Moreover, Synergy has started to organise webinars which have been kicked off with Gjalt-Jorn (GJ) Peters' excellent and well-attended talk "Your COVID-19 Risk: A Story About Theory, Practice, and Collaboration", at the EHPS online conference. These webinars will fill the gap of knowledge acquisition for post-ECR academics.

During the Synergy showcase event, we also had a lively discussion on the vision for future EMs. Our field is advancing in terms of merely engaging in academic research, to also transferring our knowledge and expertise into practice and politics. More and more are we collaborating with external stakeholders, e.g., health care staff, patients, and policy makers. Consolidation of models and methods is becoming more important as health psychology will be validated externally because of involvement with policies. EMs tend to focus on the cutting-edge research, but our discipline is still not always adept at voicing its core and presenting that core externally (aptly dubbed our 'unknown knowns'). Synergy EMs may be able to help with

this consolidation process.

An open brainstorm with the audience at the showcase event on future EM topics yielded several ideas, including testing and defining construct validity, how to increase diversity in the EHPS, and interoperability of research tools (in particularly of the taxonomies and frameworks we have been involved in developing and using). To promote networking and collaboration across the EHPS community, other formats than two-day EMs were suggested. These included 'Expert Workshops', hackathons, and extended pre-conference workshops with networking opportunities (e.g., thematic lunches) for senior researchers.

At this stage, we had been chatting for over an hour and a half, and admittedly we swayed from the serious topics into Synergy and EM related anecdotes. Skiing accidents, pigeon poo, ceilidh dancing, toilet paper and the lack thereof, French food for vegetarians, and balancing swimming time with keynote presentations may or may not have been discussed.

Conclusion

Facilitating or participating in Synergy EMs means having two full days to discuss a topic which you are passionate about and to get perspectives from international expert researchers from different career stages, not just in smaller and larger group discussions but also during lunch and dinner, and potentially over evening drinks. When facilitating and participating in an EM you get ample opportunity to form new collaborations and discuss your topic of expertise in an open-minded and friendly atmosphere. Often new friendships are formed, and occasionally even relationships. Synergy is all about finding your community, learning with and from each other, moving health psychology science forward, and having fun while doing that.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to sincerely thank the speakers and participants of the 2020 Synergy showcase event, all previous board members, Expert Meeting facilitators, and participants.

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