

The EHPS Conference in 2021 and beyond

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Our Society has expanded over the years, but not only in terms of its membership. We take pride in our influential journals, in CREATE and Synergy and their incredible contribution in achieving the goals of our Society, in the growing number of Special Interest Groups and their amazing work, in initiatives like “The EHPS in the UN” and the Practical Health Psychology Blog, which are just some of the many activities of our Society.

One of the first actions undertaken by the EHPS was the organization of an annual conference. Since the first conferences, in the mid-1980s, with only a few participants, a lot has changed. In recent years, our conferences have evolved to big scientific (and social) events with several hundreds of participants, coming not only from Europe but also from around the world. The great success of our conferences has contributed to EHPS becoming an organization with a global reach.

Of course, our annual conference is the place where scientific knowledge, new ideas, and novel approaches can be presented, evaluated and discussed. But it is not only that. Our conferences provide to health psychologists the opportunity to gather together, meet leading figures in the field and learn from them; old friends to meet again; new colleagues to develop bonds and networks and gain experience from our senior members; new ideas and collaborations to be developed. These features are the reason why our conferences are so important for our Society and its members.

The future of EHPS conferences

In the last few years, several members of our Society have expressed their concerns about the environmental footprint of our conferences and have put forward some ideas of reducing it. For example, having a biennial conference, meeting in places where access by train is easier, supporting the organization of regional conferences, etc. These concerns have given rise to a wider debate on the future of our conferences. And in a rather unfortunate circumstance, a new pandemic struck the world this year and drastically affected the way conferences are organized. As a consequence, our regular conference this year was postponed and a much smaller online scientific meeting replaced it.

Despite the success of our online scientific meeting this year (77.5% of the participants, who completed the evaluation survey, evaluated it as “excellent” or “good”), it was not without significant limitations. For instance, 97.2% of the responders said that networking is a very or somewhat important aspect of our conferences but, at the same time, the majority of them (86.1%) reported that the online event did not provide relevant opportunities.

So, it seems that we are now at a critical juncture. Not only due to the pandemic which is still here and a second wave threatens most of the countries worldwide, but also because the need to develop more environmentally friendly policies and take relevant measures is apparent. In this regard, the Executive Committee of the EHPS decided, before making any final decisions, to ask our members’ opinion about future conferences. Our members got the opportunity to express their

thoughts, suggestions and opinions in an extraordinary Members' Meeting in late September 2020, as well as through a short survey.

Outlook on the 2021 conference

Several ideas were presented at the Members' Meeting. As far as the conference in 2021 is concerned, most members expressed their concerns and warned against a regular, in-person meeting during the pandemic. The members focused not only on the health-related risks of travelling and not being able to keep social distancing, but also on the financial, ethical, and other aspects of the situation. We were informed that many universities across Europe (especially in UK and in Ireland) will not cover the costs for travelling and participating in conferences abroad for the entire 2021. Also, delegates from many countries in Asia and other parts of the world will not be able to travel to Europe for the next 6-12 months due to the pandemic. For these reasons, it was advocated by many that our next conference was held either online or in a hybrid way (i.e., both in-person and online). However, several members warned about

the great organizational efforts and expensive equipment needed for a hybrid conference.

As far as conferences in the future are concerned, members discussed two major options: the organization of meetings in a hybrid way, but after careful planning and preparation (e.g., with the use of hyflex equipment), and the organization of smaller, regional events with the support of the EHPS. Although the latter proposal was supported by several members, others expressed their concerns and doubts. Mainly, in terms of how much this would really promote our Society's aims (e.g., networking, bringing together people and ideas from all over the world), the multiple organizational efforts it would require, and the financial risk it would entail. Finally, several members underlined the need to closely collaborate with other international organizations in our field and discuss with them effective ways of using technology in order to more effectively promote our goals. It was a fruitful discussion which produced several ideas and suggestions to be processed by the Executive Committee.

Besides this extraordinary Members' Meeting, our members were also invited to respond to a short survey regarding future conferences. Ninety-

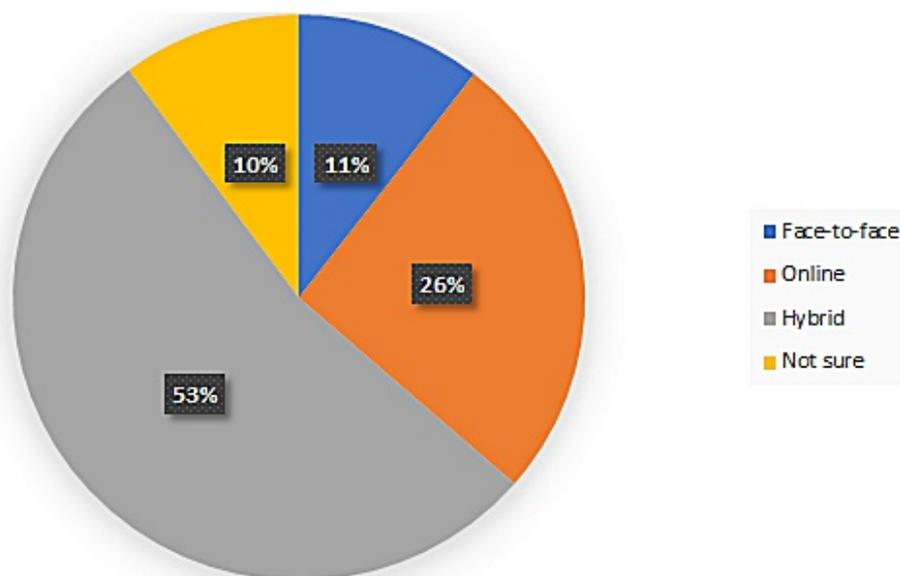


Figure 1. Participants' preferences for the type of conference for 2021.

nine members participated in this survey. Regarding the conference in 2021, more than half of the participants (51.02%) said they were not sure they would attend an in-person conference next year, even if there were no recommendations against face-to-face meetings and travelling abroad. The risk of infection during travelling or at the conference were reported as the major reasons for this reaction. Also, 10.53% stated that they would prefer an in-person only conference, 25.86% would prefer an online only conference, and 53.45% a combination of online and in-person conference (i.e., a hybrid one). In explaining their preferences, the participants offered several reasons: the potential lack of funding, risk of infection, last minute changes in travel recommendations, or the general uncertainty of the times.

The results of the survey and the suggestions and thoughts heard at the Members' Meeting were thoroughly discussed by the members of the Executive Committee, who elaborated on all potential solutions regarding the 2021 conference, their pros and cons. The decision made was to organize an online conference for this year. This decision was conveyed and discussed with Prof. Radomir Masaryk, Chair of the Bratislava Organizing Committee, Prof. Robbert Saderman, Chair of the Scientific Committee, and Mr. Petros Stratis, Easy Conferences CEO. We are currently working together with Easy Conferences so as to find out the best possible solutions that will ensure an interactive and pleasant online conference at a reasonable cost.

At this point, we would like to express our gratitude to the Organizing and the Scientific Committees of the Bratislava Conference, Easy Conferences, and especially Prof. Radomir Masaryk, for their commitment in promoting the goals of our Society and their efforts to deal with the unforeseen difficulties and the restrictions imposed by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. Their contribution is greatly appreciated. We sincerely hope that we will all meet again (in-person) in Bratislava in 2022.

EHPS conferences 2022 and beyond

Regarding future conferences and the possibility of having a biennial conference and smaller regional meeting in the meantime, participants' opinions were rather divided. The proposal was not clearly rejected, but it was not widely accepted as well (see Figure 2). According to the responses, the main reasons for having a biennial conference are:

- increased sustainability and reduced environmental footprint;
- sharing more complete research compared to yearly conferences;
- reduced costs for travelling and accommodation;
- would promote health psychology at a local level.

On the other hand, the main reasons for keeping an annual conference are:

- regional conferences will not promote the diversity of the themes and topics presented;
- biennial and regional conferences will not promote networking;
- biennial conferences will reduce the opportunities for establishing bonds among colleagues coming from different parts of Europe and the world;
- annual conferences promote engagement with the Society and friendship between its members.

In addition, some more interesting ideas were offered. For example, the idea to add an online option to our regular conferences; use virtual reality in future online conferences; a warning that hybrid conferences may lead universities to the decision to cover the expenses only for online participation which will diminish actual interaction and networking and thus increase inequality between richer and poorer universities/countries in the long run. This valuable input will be taken into serious consideration by the EC which, in collaboration with the EHPS subdivisions, will come

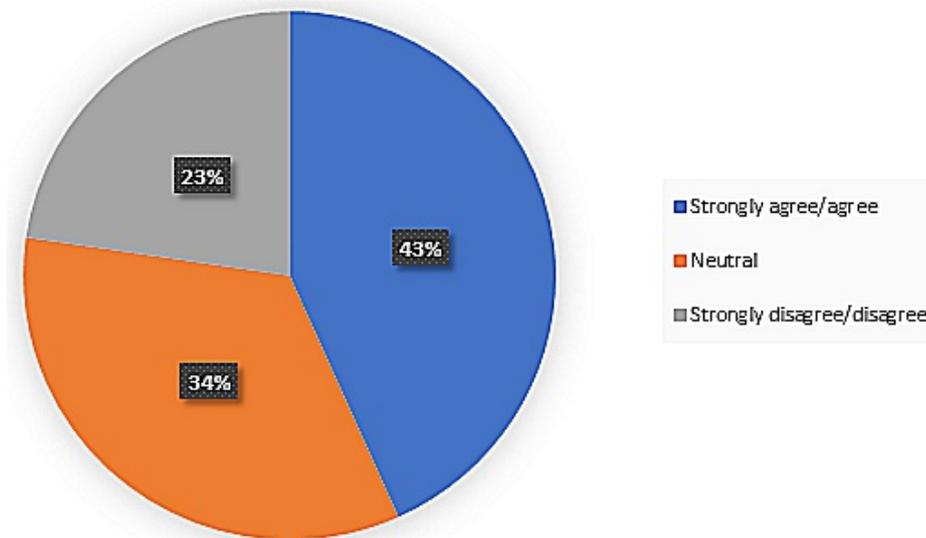


Figure 2. Participants' degree of agreement on a biennial conference.

up with specific proposals that will be submitted to the members of our Society for approval, in one of our next Members' Meeting.

Over the years, our Society has set a number of fundamental goals. That is, to encourage empirical and theoretical research in health psychology, facilitate the interchange of information related to health psychology, and promote networking. We hope that our future conferences will contribute to achieving these goals as effectively as in the past and perhaps even more so. In this respect, our members' support, your support, is invaluable and something that we definitely count on!

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