

# A reflection on EHPS 2023

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EHPS 2023 marked the first academic conference at which I had the opportunity to present my own PhD work. I am immensely grateful for being awarded a Conference Grant, which enabled this experience. The receipt of the grant filled me with excitement as it provided the chance to talk about my research to a wide audience and receive valuable feedback during a crucial phase in my PhD journey (my final year). In addition, it allowed me to learn about the exciting research being conducted in the field, refine my thinking around my research topic of smoking cessation, health inequalities, and health behaviour theory, and establish connections with fellow PhD students and academics. EHPS 2023 successfully delivered on all these fronts.

Indeed, participating in the conference provided many networking opportunities. I engaged in discussions and exchanged perspectives with both junior and more experienced researchers within my research area. Furthermore, I connected with academics who work with similar theoretical frameworks as I am, such as self-regulation, behaviour change techniques, and self-determination theory. Notably, my roommate, whom I initially met through an email call to arrange accommodation, has become a valuable new contact. This experience reinforced the idea that taking initiative in finding someone to share a conference accommodation with can lead not only to practical arrangements but can also have the unexpected bonus of forming new friendships!

Some key insights I gained from the conference

sessions included the research by Leta et al. (2023) on adolescents' motivations for initiating smoking and the potential benefits of sports-based and recreational activities in smoking prevention interventions, especially for those in vulnerable situations. The study highlighted the influence of group dynamics and conformity to group norms in facilitating smoking uptake. However, it also emphasised the positive impact of having role models in sports-based and recreational settings, such as youth workers, who can encourage healthy behaviours among adolescents. This finding caught my interest because my own research focuses on understanding the motivations and strategies behind unassisted smoking cessation and how they vary across socioeconomic levels. For example, the perception of one's socioeconomic position as low or high may influence whether smoking aligns with one's social identity and may trigger attempts to quit smoking if it conflicts with one's perceived social standing.

On the topic of health behaviour interventions, I also attended the symposium on introducing the Behaviour Change Intervention Ontology (BCIO) (Marques et al., 2023) as presented by Lisa Zhang, Professor Marie Johnston, Professor Robert West, Paulina Schenk and chaired by Professor Susan Michie. Learning about this recent development in the field which extends the Behaviour Change Technique Taxonomy (BCTTv1) (Michie et al., 2013) was of particular interest to me especially as my work relates to understanding the content of smoking cessation interventions, the populations targeted (i.e., current and former cigarette smokers in the UK), the target behaviour and outcomes

recorded (e.g., smoking cessation for three months regardless of type of assistance used), as well as pinpointing the mechanisms of action behind successful behaviour change (e.g., reduction in craving, social influences, replacing habits). I now look forward to learning more about the Ontology and integrating it to my own work.

Another key presentation for me, with direct implications for integrating new ideas into ongoing projects, focused on exploring whether self-enacted techniques for changing and self-managing behaviour (Knittle et al., 2020) impact behavioural determinants derived from self-determination theory (Knittle, Fidrich & Hankonen, 2023). This study identified three specific techniques – behavioural goal setting, self-monitoring of outcomes of behaviour, and associating identity with changed behaviour – as likely contributors to enhancing one's sense of autonomy. This finding is of particular significance for my research, where I draw from self-determination theory in qualitative interviews with ex-smokers to understand motivations for unassisted quitting, with emphasis on autonomous motivation (i.e., performing a behaviour because it is enjoyable or personally meaningful). Moreover, I explore the self-enacted behaviour change techniques employed by individuals during their journeys to unassisted cessation, making the connection between technique use and motivation a point of interest in my work.

Finally, I attended the stakeholder engagement discussion that showcased the collaborative work between the Aberdeen Health Psychology Group and the local health board (National Health Service in the Grampian area). It was interesting to learn about the collaboration between academia and the health board, how they aligned their research priorities for mutual benefit, and their ability to adapt plans in response to the rapidly changing conditions brought about by Covid-19. As a PhD student, this discussion highlighted to me the importance of collaborations with external partners

beyond academia as an opportunity to enhance the relevance and impact of our work.

Conference sessions and networking aside, EHPS 2023 held an unexpected surprise for me: the revelation that Health Psychologists know how to rock! Witnessing well-known and esteemed professors energetically rocking out to EHPS à la YMCA was a sight to behold. It struck me that as a community, we love our fun, and we love our science. After all, these are not mutually exclusive.

## References

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