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Abstracts and Afterparties: Surviving the EHPS conference in the best way possible

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Abstract

Attending a scientific conference can be inspiring to some and highly stressful for others. Stress may not only arise from presenting, but also from the social and cognitive demands of being surrounded by others, navigating a tight schedule and managing networking expectations. At the same time, conferences offer valuable opportunities for learning, collaboration and identity-building within one's academic community, contributing to professional development. This reflection paper provides guidance for preparing and attending a conference. We outline practical considerations and personal experiences related to four areas: (1) preparations, (2) program, (3) networking and (4) participating in social activities.

Key words: EHPS, conference experience, conference guidance, networking

Introduction

Attending a conference can be the highlight of the year for some people, while for others, and even sometimes for the same person, it can be quite stressful. This stress may come from having to present (Jones et al., 2011), but also from the social and cognitive demands of being constantly surrounded by others and maintaining professional composure. Conferences often involve tight and long schedules with extensive social interaction and the pressure to make the most of our time there. This can lead to social fatigue and information overload, meaning to receive too much information simultaneously (Eppler and Mengis, 2004). Conferences also provide opportunities for learning, collaboration and identity-building with one's academic community, which is also part of someone's professional career development (Bentley et al., 2019).

To begin with, let's briefly introduce ourselves: Yil defended her PhD in 2024 and now works as an assistant professor in Health Psychology. She has attended the EHPS twice and is a board member of the Association for Researchers in Psychology and Health (ARPH). Ciska works as an assistant professor in Health Promotion and Communication. She has attended the EHPS conference a handful of times over her career and many other conferences as well. So we have been where you are and have the battle scars to prove it. We have also had some great experiences at conferences, some of them shared together.

So, how do we think you can survive a conference? First of all, there is probably no single answer to this. Everyone experiences conferences differently. People have different preferences, energy levels and recharge in different ways. In this reflection paper, we aim to offer guidance on how to approach attending a conference from your perspective, abilities and challenges. The advice presented in this manuscript represents a selected subset based on our personal perspective. We have organized our discussion into four areas: preparations, the program, networking and social activities.

Before you continue reading, here are our first pieces of advice: Be kind, to others and yourself, and have fun. We all want to showcase ourselves at a conference; everyone is probably juggling nerves and information overload. A bit of kindness and (self-)compassion might help to manage your expectation and not take every thing that happens too seriously.

Preparations

Getting the most out of your conference experience starts at home.

- Submit one or more abstracts to your conference of choice

Think about what research or practical application that is relevant to the conference audience you can share and consider submitting an abstract to showcase your work. A submission committee reviews all submitted abstracts and decides whether your work can feature during the conference and in what way. Some conferences allow you to submit several abstracts as a corresponding author, others (such as the EHPS in 2025) limit you to one.

Ciska: *"An unwritten rule during my time as a PhD student was that conference attendance equalled submission of an abstract. I pictured presenting my work in front of a bunch of hypercritical researchers questioning my every word and who would be appalled at my imperfect research. Suffice to say, I wasn't that keen on it then. However, it turns out that this doom scenario had no resemblance to the actual experience. Sure, I was nervous and happy to have completed the presentation without falling over, I am sure not everyone was convinced by my work and I have dealt with my share of difficult questions and audience members since then. The thing to remember is that you don't have to have all the answers, that is the purpose of sharing. It is okay to acknowledge the limitations of your work or admit you don't know something (you can always look it up*

later). *Nobody has all the answers, but by sharing, you can improve your scientific thinking and potentially also that of your audience*".

- Review the (pre-)conference programme

Some conferences offer workshops that focus on training a specific skill in the days before the opening of the conference itself. They are usually an add-on charge, but could be a great opportunity for you to gain some extra skills that would be more difficult to access otherwise.

- Clarify your purpose

Ask yourself this question: What should attending this conference result in for me? Are you there to learn, to network, to present, to be inspired, or a mix of all of these elements? Having a sense of purpose might help you to make better choices once the conference begins.

- Book and pack with purpose

Conferences tend to offer hotel options to stay during the conference. Consider what you need from your accommodation; you are probably going to spend a bit more for a hotel room in close proximity to the venue. Also, consider where your priorities lie; do you like a quiet location or would you like to be close to the nightlife, shops or the train station? What other modes of transport can you use to safely get to the conference venue (e.g., public transport, taxi, by bike or on foot)?

When packing your luggage, consider what you will need for the conference and beyond. Some conferences expect formal wear, for others any outfit is acceptable. You might also want to include cosy attire for chilling in your room or that snazzy party outfit (or both!).

Yil: *"I always struggle with what to wear to a conference. How formal is it? What is acceptable and what is not? I really love dresses, and at the last EHPS conference I was sometimes called overdressed. But, I feel good in this clothes so therefore I would say: Dress for confidence. Choose clothing that makes you feel confident and comfortable. At the EHPS, you don't have to dress formally for every session. And bonus tip: layers help with unpredictable room temperatures!"*

Program

Usually, the full conference program becomes available a few days to weeks before the event. These programs are typically dense, with mostly several parallel sessions taking place at the same time.

- Create your schedule

Identify sessions that are most relevant to your research interests and create a personal schedule. For example, at the EHPS, there is an app available in which you can mark which sessions you want to attend and in this way you can create your own schedule.

- Navigating through the programme

Several strategies might be effective to navigate through the programme. You can identify your key goals for participation and select sessions accordingly. You could also divide sessions amongst colleagues, you could coordinate beforehand by allocating different sessions to each person and you can report back to each other. You could also reach out to presenters (see networking part). Skipping a session to rest, recharge, or reflect on what you have already heard can make the rest of the conference more meaningful.

However, flexibility is equally important. Be prepared to deviate from your initial plan when circumstances call for it, maybe you have trouble concentrating in a session or a conversation with fellow-attendees feels more valuable at the moment.

Yil: *"At my first conference, I felt like I had to attend everything, as if every session was mandatory. Over time, I realized that it is not mandatory and that you have a choice in this. As a matter of fact, not choosing might hamper your energy levels. Sometimes, I decide not to go to presentations by colleagues or even friends in order to prioritize sessions that align more closely with my own learning goals and distribute my energy wisely. Wherever your priority sits, I would recommend: Protect your energy. Notice when you need rest, a bit of quiet or a walk outside. It is okay to skip a keynote if your brain is full. It is also fine to go to every afterparty"*.

So in short: Be strategic, not omnipresent. You do not have to attend every session. You can, if you want to. But we advise to choose talks that interest you or align with your goals, and allow yourself breaks.

Networking

Conferences are considered valuable opportunities for professional networking. Networking involves more than only meeting other professionals in your field, it is also about establishing meaningful connections with those professionals, that may lead to future collaborations or even steps on your future career path. Research shows that in-person meetings can indeed provide both informational and social benefits (Dumbell and Haddow, 2024).

- Identify your networking goal & select matching networking opportunities

If you plan to increase your network at a conference, your next question could be: with which purpose? Do you want to improve your social interaction and networking skills, identify other professionals with mutual interests, are you seeking job or exchange opportunities, are you interested in collaborations or mentoring or something different altogether? These could all be valid goals, but in order to reach them you might employ different tactics. A good place to start is to identify where you can find the people that

you want to interact with. If you are interested in expanding your network with others that have similar interests, you might find them attending a session focused on this (or even presenting). Social events and the conference dinner might be great way to work on your social interaction skills with anyone who is happening to sit down next to you, while crafting mentoring or collaborative relationships might require a more personal interaction with very specific individuals.

Ciska: *“I am reluctant to advise you to set a goal based on numbers when it comes to networking, as this implies that it does not matter who you talk to, as long as you talk. That certainly is useful if you feel networking quite challenging, as it helps you get more at ease with stepping up and doing it, regardless of what cyclone is making the rounds in your insides”.*

- Choose your strategy: Roam free or find support

There are several ways in which you can approach networking. Roaming free refers to you networking on your own, not purposefully seeking connections with direct colleagues or friends (i.e., people that you already know and have some level of comfort with). This strategy is especially useful when 1) you have trouble connecting with new people if you can fall back on people you already know and/or 2) when you have a very specific networking goal that is not shared with them. Finding support refers to you making use of people already in your network to connect with individuals in their network or to network as a team. This strategy is especially useful when 1) your networking goals align and/or 2) when you plan to network within their network.

- Actively participate in sessions

When attending a session, ask questions after a presentation or participate in a group discussion. This will allow you to more actively process the information offered (Stenlund et al., 2016). Our advice is not to wait for the perfectly formulated question, as the opportunity will pass. You don’t have to sound brilliant. Overall, people appreciate kind words and genuine questions about their work. After the session ends, you can connect with speakers or others asking questions to follow-up on their original answers.

- Attend to your existing network

Once you have started to build your network, it requires maintenance. If you connected with another attendee at the conference that you think would be a meaningful addition to your network, follow-up with them. Follow-up can be very brief or extensive, depending on your goals. Social media accounts, e.g., LinkedIn, can help to connect initially and also offer you the opportunity to keep your network up-to-date with your work by adding posts. A short email might be a bit more personal, especially relevant if you want to.

Ciska: *“Forging personal relations takes time and attention. People don’t tend to become very enthusiastic about collaborating with someone these have just met. This probably goes for you too. Making a connection is the first step, then it’s about maintenance. During the conference, but also afterwards. Thank people you meet for a nice discussion, keep them updated on your goings on (be selective here) and when the time is right, link with a follow-up idea to deepen collaboration”.*

Participating in social activities

In addition to the academic program, most conferences (including the EHPS), offer a social program. This social program often includes a welcome reception, conference dinner, afterparties, pub crawls, organized walks, and even more. These activities are designed to informally foster connections, create conversations and to provide a break from content-based sessions.

- Choosing your social activities

But how do you choose which social activities to attend? And do you really have to go to everything? The short answer is: No. One common source is the fear of missing out. This pressure can make people feel like they need to attend everything in the social program because they are afraid to miss something (Gupta and Sharma, 2021). Participation in the social program is often highly individual. Decisions are best guided by personal goals, preferences and energy levels. Attending a large reception may offer the chance to meet many colleagues at once, while smaller-scale dinners or other informal gatherings may allow for deeper connections. You might enjoy burning the midnight oil and you might be more focused on individual experiences. The social program is meant to enhance your experience, not to exhaust you.

Yil: *“I enjoy social activities; I find many of them fun and energising. At the same time, attending a conference can be exhausting for me. I have learned to check in with myself throughout the day and see what I actually feel up for in each moment. One thing I always prioritise, though, is sharing a meal together. After that, I simply assess whether I still have the energy for a party or if it is time to call it a night. And yes, it sometimes feels as though you might be missing out on something. But the truth is, you cannot be everywhere at once”.*

- Organise your own social activities

And you don’t have to limit yourself to the official conference social program. You can also organise or join your own social activities on the side: inviting colleagues for a casual dinner, going for a walk in the city, or meet up for a coffee. Participating in these self-organised activities gives you the freedom to socialise on your own terms, build meaningful connections and recharge.

Ciska: *“Over the years, I have learnt that I function best if I also set some time aside during the conference for a bit of alone time. That could be a coffee break on my own, catching up on some work in my hotel room or even some window-shopping. I notice if I don’t offer myself opportunities to recharge, I will regret it later on. Knowing myself helps me to be deliberately present at the conference”.*

Closing

So, since navigating a conference can feel like finding your way through a labyrinth: packed sessions, networking, and social events, we hope this paper will help you guiding your next conference. And do you have any more specific conference tips? Feel free to share them with us, we are eager to hear your best practices!

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