Bringing Researchers Together: Report on EHPS Network Grant

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This article describes the process of applying for an EHPS network grant ('Exploring when and how self-affirmation works') and the progress made in building a research network across several European countries. There are three aims of the article, to (1) outline the application process and consider how to manage a network grant, (2) highlight the benefits of network grant funding, and (3) outline the activities achieved during the grant period. We begin by outlining the background to the network grant application.

Background to grant application

The start point for the grant application was a shared interest in self-affirmation among the researchers involved in the bid. Self-affirmation involves asking individuals to focus on a valued aspect of their self-concept (e.g., honesty) prior to receiving threatening information (e.g., a health warning). At the time of the grant application, research had shown that self-affirmation was effective at reducing defensive processing of health warnings (see Harris & Epton, 2009, 2010), but had less impact on health behaviour change (Harris & Napper, 2005, Harris et al., 2008). In particular, there was a lack of research on the processes underpinning and modifying self-affirmation effects, and we thought it would be interesting to conduct

research to explore these processes.

EHPS conferences provided a useful meeting point for discussions on self-affirmation, with symposia at the 2009 conference in Pisa and the 2010 conference in Cluj bringing together researchers interested in this topic. Richard Cooke, Peter Harris and Benjamin Schüz participated in both symposia and after the Cluj conference, Richard and Benjamin discussed the possibility of applying for an EHPS network grant. Independently, Urte and Peter were also discussing applying for an EHPS network grant, so they joined forces and recruited Guido to round off the team.

When considering making an application for an EHPS network grant it is a good idea to discuss your proposals with colleagues at conferences and to consider which European researchers are working in your area of interest. All applications to the network scheme need to have researchers based in three different European countries. Our submission included five researchers based in four countries (RC & PH in the UK; BS then in Germany, US in Switzerland and GvK in the Netherlands). Setting up networks in this way is a good idea if you plan to subsequently apply for funding from EU funding schemes, which typically require applicants from multiple countries.

Network grant application

Our proposal was to conduct research into the processes underpinning and modifying self-affirmation effects; each individual had

different ideas about contributions to the project. Benjamin wrote an initial outline for the application, and then everyone added their own proposals for research projects: We settled on the idea that four researchers would conduct research studies into related, but independent, processes, and that one researcher would oversee the projects. As part of the application you need to nominate a coordinator who will liaise with the EHPS, and oversee the delivery of the network grant. This is an important post not only with regard to communicating with the EHPS, but also because it is always good to have a clear distribution of responsibilities. Moreover, we found, as with other grant applications, that it is well worth setting early deadlines for applicants to submit work so that the different pieces can be edited into a coherent application.

Managing the network grant

After getting funding, you are faced with several practical issues in managing the grant. The main issue to address is the timing of the research meetings. We proposed that we would have four research meetings, based in different countries, including a meeting at the first EHPS conference taking place once the award has been made, which is requirement of the scheme. We received funding (€5000) in November 2010, so the EHPS conference in Crete in 2011 was to be our first conference meeting. To progress the grant we met before Crete, in June 2011 in Berlin. Our second meeting was held in Crete in September 2011, and our third meeting was held in Amsterdam in May 2012. We held our last meeting at the EHPS conference in Bordeaux in July 2013.

Activity during the funding period

The work programme for our project was to conduct four studies. We have completed these projects and presented the initial results of these in a symposium at the 2013 EHPS conference in Bordeaux. Our results suggest that self-affirmation decreases resistance regardless of the health message's threat level and to genuine emotive warnings, and may do so by increasing anticipated regret. However, some backfire effects occur and further studies are clearly needed and are currently being discussed in our networking group to understand more about how and why self-affirmation works. The study conducted by Richard showed that self-affirmation promoted physical activity regardless of threat level. The study conducted by Benjamin found that self-affirmation increased intentions to reduce alcohol consumption, with the strongest effects on heavy drinkers, and that these increased intentions lead to a subsequent reduction in alcohol consumption. The research by Guido showed that self-affirmation increased anticipated regret and intentions, and that regret mediated the affirmation effects on intentions. In addition, the results suggest that anticipated regret and intentions are serial mediators linking self-affirmation and behavior. Finally the study conducted by Urte found that self-affirmation decreased healthy intentions, which may have been due to the overall low level of defensiveness observed in this particular sample (cf. earlier research showing negative effects of self-affirmation among non-threatened participants).

So, thus far we have created a network of researchers across Europe, delivered a symposium on the work conducted, and generated data for four independent peer review papers. We are currently discussing future joint research projects and other funding options.

Complications

We planned to complete our research meetings in 12 months as required by the scheme. However, it quickly became apparent that this timeframe was impossible to meet. We recommend being realistic about your proposal: in hindsight we were too ambitious about what we wanted to achieve in 12 months, and we recommend that you factor your proposals into your day-to-day activities when applying for a network grant.

Another issue that we did not appreciate at the time of our application is what happens to your plans when your team members all decide to move jobs during your project. By the time of our first meeting in June 2011, we knew Benjamin was off to Australia. In 2012 Urte was moving from Bern to Konstanz and is now moving from Konstanz to Zurich. Also in 2012 Peter moved to Sussex and Guido is now working in Amsterdam. So, as with all projects, bear in mind that you need to factor in the unexpected – add some room for manoeuvre in your timings.

Benefits of EHPS network grant

When you apply for a network grant you know that it will benefit your research career, but we believe it is difficult to fully comprehend these benefits until you receive the funding and organize your meetings. The scientific benefits alone are worth the time and effort needed to put together an application: through the network grant we have been given the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues in other countries, learning about their approach to research, their ways of working, and forging links for future research. You are being given funds to discuss science, and there is nothing better, especially given the increasing demands on academic time. Creating an international network also opens up funding schemes that would be inaccessible to researchers working in one country. So, by proposing a network you can access not only EU funding schemes (e.g., Horizon 20:20) and national schemes that focus on working across Europe. For example the ORA scheme funds applications for bilateral projects between France, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK. Beyond the scientific benefits, there are also many social benefits from travelling around Europe meeting colleagues and discussing shared research interests!

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