

Summary report for EHPS CREATE Grant 2009

Visiting Scholar: Lisa Mellon, Department of Psychology, Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland

Host institution: The German Centre of Gerontology, Berlin 3rd -7th May 2010

Pre placement goals

As outlined in my application for the 2009 CREATE grant, there were a number of goals set for this scholar visit. The primary goal was to learn more about large-scale longitudinal ageing studies and identify points of mutual interest with potential for collaboration between the Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA) and the German Ageing Survey. Secondary goals included consultation with researchers in the German Centre of Gerontology on conceptual and discipline based challenges in collecting individual health psychology data in population based data sets, and furthermore to learn about methodological problems in analyzing large scale data sets.

Post placement analysis

The scholar visit presented the opportunity to achieve all of the above pre-determined goals. An important part of the visit included a scholar presentation to the members of the German Ageing Survey research team. The purpose of this presentation was to introduce TILDA to the German audience, and also to elaborate on some potential research questions regarding the Ageing Perceptions Questionnaire (APQ) role within TILDA, in light of a shared interest between myself and my colleagues and the German Centre of Gerontology in the area of longitudinal ageing perceptions data.

Some preliminary comparative analyses were conducted on similar APQ items in TILDA and Personal Resources of Elderly People with Multi-morbidity: Fortification of Effective Health Behavior (PREFER), a longitudinal study run by the German Centre of Gerontology. This information was shared with the PREFER research team, and allowed prospective development of ideas for the enrichment of cross sectional analyses from Wave 1 of TILDA with micro-longitudinal data from the PREFER study in relation to the shared APQ items.

Particular emphasis was placed on familiarization with statistical techniques employed by the German Centre of Gerontology in longitudinal analyses. Workshops were conducted in order to improve knowledge on the application of appropriate statistical techniques to longitudinal data with software such as MPlus and SPSS. Specific attention was paid to development of skills in the area of structural equation modeling and latent change modeling in relation to psychological constructs, with some focus on latent growth curve analysis for more general longitudinal analyses.

To complete the visit, a consultation was conducted with experienced health psychology researchers Dr. Susanne Wurm and Dr. Benjamin Schüz in order to integrate newly acquired knowledge during the visit into potentially sustainable PhD ideas, with a focus on integrating similar elements of the German Ageing Survey and TILDA datasets.

Conclusions and future plans

The visit was enlightening to me in terms of developing a deeper understanding of longitudinal research, and learning from experienced researchers in the area of ageing perceptions. Their expertise facilitated the development of my PhD research questions and they provided clarity in terms of appropriate methodology and analysis for my PhD. Following the visit, I feel better equipped with the confidence, knowledge and skills to undertake longitudinal research in the area of ageing perceptions. I am also extremely grateful to have developed a good working relationship with the research team at the German Centre of Gerontology, and I hope to continue to learn from them as my PhD progresses. Furthermore, I was able to facilitate the exchange of information between TILDA and the German Ageing Study. TILDA, as a newly established longitudinal ageing study can learn a lot from the German Ageing Study, with three waves completed.

The researchers at the German Centre of Gerontology provided expertise and guidance in relation to PhD development and highlighted the potential for long term collaboration between myself and RCSI and the German Centre of Gerontology in light of their shared interest and expertise in ageing perceptions research and longitudinal analyses. There is potential for a further visit with a view to accessing the German Ageing Survey dataset as part of PhD, and utilizing the expertise in research methodology and ageing perceptions research housed within the German Centre of Gerontology.

Special thanks to Dr. Benjamin Schüz and Dr. Susanne Wurm for their expertise, patience and generosity during the visit.