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FEPSAC International Congress: Sport Psychology - Theories and Applications for Performance, Health and Humanity – A Doctoral Student's Reflection

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FEPSAC International Congress: Sport Psychology - Theories and Applications for Performance, Health and Humanity – A PhD Student's Reflection

Olympic gold medallist, Michael Diamond, stated that "Success for an athlete follows many years of hard work and dedication". This was clearly evident at the 2015 European Federation of Sport Psychology Congress (FEPSAC) in Bern, Switzerland (14^{th} – 19^{th} July), where hundreds of sport and exercise psychologists demonstrated the hard work that goes into research within not just sport, but also exercise and health. With this being the first international congress that I have attended, it is with great enthusiasm that I am able to provide a reflection on this congress from the perspective of a doctoral student. In addition to providing a reflection on my experience of FEPSAC 2015, this review also aims to offer advice for other neophyte researchers and practitioners who want to capitalize on conference/congress opportunities (e.g., by networking and disseminating research findings), and to reflect on some of the key messages delivered at the congress.

Key Messages Delivered at FEPSAC 2015

The congress showcased exciting and inspiring research and applied practice that is currently being conducted across the globe within the context of sport and exercise psychology. As it is not possible to provide a reflection on every session at FEPSAC 2015 within the constraints of this single review article, I will focus on the fundamental messages that resonated with me personally, and which I believe could help advance sport and exercise psychology research and practice.

One concept that was addressed during a number of sessions was the idea that researchers can be over-reliant on pre-established theories. It was suggested that research often focuses on the same theories that have been consistently used in the past. However, during his keynote address entitled "Escape from cognitivism – exercise as a hedonic experience", Dr Panteleimon Ekkekakis posed the question: does becoming reliant on the same theories create a bubble that restricts our vision? Within his lecture, Dr Ekkekakis emphasised the need for sport and exercise psychology researchers to move away from relying on pre-established theories, to prevent narrow-mindedness in their research activities. He also demonstrated that some of the theories that we often rely on lack appropriate and robust empirical support. This notion was reiterated by Professor Martin Hagger during his presentation entitled "Can models of motivation and social cognition used to predict exercise behaviour be rejected?" Numerous articles that have "tested" social cognitive models have claimed to provide support for them (for more information see Ogden, 2003). However, methods used in such instances are often omnibus, despite the fact that social cognitive models usually include multiple constructs that interact in a distinct nomological order. Therefore, it could be suggested that the tests used to evaluate these models lack validity. Furthermore, Professor Hagger highlighted that authors often conclude (or at least imply) that their data supports a specific model in its entirety, even if the data does not support some of the key hypotheses of the model being tested. Professor Hagger claimed that this represents an error in the interpretation of data that often occurs when testing social cognitive models used within sport and exercise psychology. When testing a model, if a researcher's data does not support all of the model's key hypotheses, the data lacks sufficient evidence to exhaustively uphold the model. Thus, it is advised that sport and exercise psychology researchers and practitioners closely consider the theoretical frameworks that they are using, developing and maintaining an

awareness of the potential detriments of using such frameworks (e.g., giving a narrow-minded focus). Furthermore, researchers should take care with their use of terminology and the conclusions that are drawn, especially if their data does not fully support all tenets of a model or framework. To address this, Professor Hagger suggested that researchers provide *a priori* criteria for acceptance in respect of the model to be tested.

The importance of critical thinking was frequently demonstrated in a number of presentations at FEPSAC. For example, Dr Ekkekakis' keynote address provided an eye-opening emphasis on the importance of critical thinking when considering previously published literature and general consensus statements. The example provided by Dr Ekkekakis was associated with the commonly used statement "exercise makes you feel better". This is a message that has been advocated within a multitude of literature reviews and text books, and has, as a consequence, been disseminated to the general public, media, students, and practitioners. However, Dr Ekkekakis suggested that humans are inclined to consistently and continually engage in activities and behaviours that make them feel better. If this premise is true, and exercise does indeed make people feel better, then why do so few people meet the guidelines for daily exercise/physical activity (see Backhouse, Ekkekakis, Biddle, Foskett, & Williams, 2007)? The American College of Sports Medicine (2013) suggested that exercise does not always make people feel better because it can cause feelings of fatigue and negative affect. This is supported by British Heart Foundation (BHF) research (see BBC News, 2007), which indicated that only 4% of people find exercise fun. Therefore, the actual effect of exercise, as reported in the BHF data, does not support the often cited statement that "exercise makes you feel better". During the keynote address, Dr Ekkekakis suggested that this may be due to the exercise intensity that people are working at. He indicated that *different* exercise intensities are likely to result in *different*

affective responses for *different* people, and therefore emphasised the importance of considering individual differences when prescribing intensities of exercise, rather than blindly accepting the notion that exercise (of any type) will make you feel better. The key message that I took from this common theme of the congress is that we tend to believe statements that are consistently supported in the published literature rather than being critical of the processes and methods by which findings have been established.

Professor Kerry McGannon also urged us to be more critical of the claims made within research and not simply accept published findings. However, it is not just the literature we read that we should critically consider but also the methods we use to conduct research, and the way we teach our students. Professor McGannon suggested that, as researchers, we should not follow the trend of conducting "safe research" but push the boundaries of possibility and creatively approach new research ventures. Professor Brett Smith provided a further example of our need to be more critical of our research methods when discussing inter-rater reliability. Professor Smith argued that qualitative research which claims to have used methods to persue "inter-rater reliability" is often methodologically flawed, given the difficulty in, and rarity of, true inter-rater reliability being achieved. With regards to critical teaching methods, Dr Ekkekakis advised that we should be teaching our students to understand by developing their critical understanding and critical evaluation skills. Rather than taking a narrow-minded approach to teaching (e.g., providing students with pre-determined theories to learn), we should be teaching and developing skills such as how to think critically about these theories (e.g., Dwyer, Hogan, & Stewart, 2012, 2014; Halpern, 2003).

The Russell Pioneering Impact Group (2012) stated that "world-class research, in its many guises, can transform our lives and reach areas we may never have thought of" (p. 1). This

demonstrates the importance of conducting research with impact. As a PhD student, my supervisors have often emphasised the need for impact along with a focus on rigor and originality within the research that I conduct. Consequently, this is something that I look for when reviewing research. I found that the presenters that clearly demonstrated impact at the congress resonated with me as this seemed to enhance the quality of the research. It was refreshing to see that Professor Brett Smith emphasised the need to demonstrate impact to maximize the chance of research findings being published in peer-reviewed journals. This experience has reinforced my understanding of the importance of ensuring impact is demonstrated within research, regardless of whether it is published in written format or presented orally at a conference/congress.

Another key message that was re-iterated throughout FEPSAC was the need for sport and exercise psychology researchers to move away from experimentally manipulative methods and conduct more "real world" research that is ecologically valid. It was argued that experimentally manipulative methods may not reflect authentic, real life situations as experienced by athletes, coaches, family members, and patients within sport and exercise contexts. The dominance of experimentally manipulative methods within this domain may be explained by research (Brustad, 2008; Culver, Gilbert, & Sparkes, 2012) which has demonstrated that the positivist/post-positivist approaches are the predominant paradigms applied within sport psychology research. However, as Professor McGannon suggested, we should adopt new approaches in order to further develop the research area.

Experience as a Doctoral Student and Advice for Others

As this opportunity has been beneficial for my professional development, I felt it may be worthwhile to share my key experiences of the congress in this reflective article. On our way to the congress, my PhD supervisors and I joked about how "uncool" I was to be attending the congress with my supervisory team. In contrast, to what I expected to find, I realised how useful an experience it was to attend with my supervisors and other colleagues from Leeds Beckett University. To specify briefly, it was an excellent opportunity to spend a prolonged period of time with my supervisors to get to know more about the person behind the supervisor in a relaxed collegiate setting. In turn, this has enhanced my supervision experience as I feel much more connected to my supervisors. Based on my experiences of FEPSAC, I would encourage students to ask if it is possible to attend international conferences/congresses with their supervisory team to learn "the ropes" of conference/congress attendance and participation.

Being quite a reserved individual by nature, one of my aims for FEPSAC was to develop my networking skills. Networking can be a daunting task for neophyte researchers, but I understand that it plays an integral role in academic development and research dissemination. Knowing few people at the congress meant that I was grateful to have support from colleagues who welcomed me into conversations with other academics and enabled me to learn methods of networking from them. This enhanced the confidence that I had in myself and by the end of the week, I found myself able to do this independently. I also came to realise that at large events such as FEPSAC, many other attendees were in the same position as me and were attending for the first time. In itself, I found FEPSAC to be an excellent networking opportunity and the formulaic layout of the congress seemed to enhance this (e.g., being on a University campus, having adequate time to network throughout the day). Based on my experiences, my advice to other PhD students is to allow networking to occur naturally, remain open minded, and engage

fully with every aspect (e.g., academic sessions, social opportunities) of a conference/congress. In addition, I found it useful to have a goal as to how many people I wanted to introduce myself to independently during the congress. I believe that the more experience you get of achieving simple targets such as these, the more confident and effective you will become, as experience is paramount when developing these skills. I also found it beneficial to spend some time considering who I wanted to meet at the congress – not necessarily focusing on the "big names" in our field, but also by the nature and focus of their work. For example, my research considers the media as an organizational stressor, which prompted me to make attempts to engage with delegates whose research interests were similar. Of course, whilst this is useful, it is important to keep an open mind, as you never know what opportunities and overlaps you might find in the room.

With 133 scientific contributions, and 714 delegates, FEPSAC delivered an extensive programme of activities encompassing a wide variety of sport and exercise psychology topics. This demonstrated the immense amount of research being conducted within this domain. Consequently, one of the key challenges I experienced at the congress was to identify and attend the symposiums and/or workshops that were most relevant to my own stage of development. With so many options available, it was important to be selective, opting for sessions that were deemed most likely to be of benefit to me. One recommendation that I have for others is to spend time reading the conference/congress abstracts and discuss the available options with others prior to attending the sessions. This should help you to plan in advance which sessions to attend, reducing the risk of missing symposia, workshops, or other presentations likely to be highly relevant to your research area. Being both a PhD student and a Graduate Teaching Assistant, I found it useful to attend sessions that dovetailed my research area and chosen methods, as well

as sessions that explored topics with which I was not as familiar. I also found it useful to take away at least one key point from each session that I attended (e.g., examples of effective presentation styles, potential critique, future research ideas).

Conclusions

In summary, the key points that resonated throughout FEPSAC 2015 were three-fold:

a) We as sport and exercise psychology researchers should ensure that we demonstrate critical thinking and impact through our research activities;

b) There is a strong rationale for being less reliant on pre-determined theories to inform our hypotheses, methods, and subsequent conclusions;

c) There is a need to develop more naturalistic research in authentic contexts, whilst maintaining the appropriate level of scientific rigour.

If possible, I would advise other PhD students to enquire about opportunities to attend their first international conference/congress with their PhD supervisors. In all, attending FEPSAC was an excellent experience and the skills that I gained have been beneficial in developing my confidence and competence as a sport and exercise psychology researcher.

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