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Featured Article

NIBPS 2021 Postgraduate Workshop: Overcoming Research Challenges - what the experts had to say

Natasha Dalton & Cara Ghiglieri

If the past year has taught us anything, it is that we need to be adaptable in our approach to research. In this article we detail the experiences and advice given by experts during the NIBPS 2021 postgraduate workshop. Speakers discussed how they creatively overcame challenges presented to them by the pandemic. We also use this opportunity to share our own experiences of organising a workshop and provide some tips we learned along the way, as well as information regarding PsyPAG workshop funding.

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, the academic world as we knew it quickly ground to a halt as conferences, workshops, and face-to-face lectures were cancelled. However, in an industry based on innovation and resilience, academia harnessed the opportunity to rethink, and virtual conferences have become a part of our new normal. As the postgraduate representatives for the NIBPS, we organised a workshop for the NIBPS Annual Conference 2021 to give postgraduates and early career researchers insight into how supervisors across psychology disciplines adjusted to the pandemic. The workshop titled “Overcoming Research Challenges – A Flexible Approach” provided an opportunity to look forward to post-pandemic times. The workshop consisted of 10 speakers with 10-minute presentations split into two halves with a 15-minute Q&A panel at the end of each half. The speakers included:

- Dr Victoria Simms, a Reader in Psychology at Ulster University, and an established researcher in developmental psychology
- Dr Denis O'Hora, an Experimental Psychologist and Behavioural Scientist at NUI Galway;
- Dr Enda Cunningham, a Senior Educational Psychologist and a key member of the teaching team on the Doctorate of Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology at Queen's University Belfast;
- Dr Catherine Reeve, a Lecturer at Queen's University Belfast in Animal Welfare and Behaviour;
- Dr Niamh Kennedy, a Cognitive Neuroscientist and Lecturer in Neuropsychology at Ulster University;
- Dr Pauline Adair, a Senior Lecturer and Programme Director for the Doctorate in Clinical Psychology at Queen's University Belfast and an HCPC registered clinical and health psychologist;
- Dr Gavin Breslin, a Senior Lecturer in Sport and Exercise at Ulster University and a Chartered Sports and Exercise Psychologist;
- Dr Claire Hewson, a Senior Lecturer in Psychology and Chair of the Human Research Ethics Committee for the Open University;
- Professor Tony Cassidy, a Professor of Child and Family Health Psychology, and both a Health Psychologist and Sports and Exercise Psychologist and;

- Dr Suzanne McCartney, a recent graduate from Stranmillis University College who completed her viva virtually.

Each speaker discussed how the pandemic forced them to think differently about their methodology, data collection, research recruitment and the impact this had on supervisor and researcher wellbeing. The panel members spoke not only of how they overcame challenges, but also managed to find some positive outcomes along the way.

Hearing from the experts: a summary of key themes across the workshop.

Changing gears / Getting creative

For Catherine, the pandemic provided a unique challenge to her research, as her participants were dogs. Pre-Covid, her research involved bringing dogs into the lab to smell breath and sweat samples from humans while researchers monitored how the dogs responded. Post-Covid, she had to change gears to a focus on cognitive tests commonly used to evaluate working dogs. Her team had to get creative by virtually conducting stress protocols and asking dog-owning participants to collect samples themselves and drop them off at a safe point in the university. Catherine believes that this experience presented a positive opportunity for her team to learn new research fields, develop skills with new research designs, and get creative with research protocols. Most importantly, it meant her team got to spend more time with their own dogs!

Denis also recognised the importance of creative thinking and advocated reducing, reusing, or recycling data. He recommended making use of registered reports, using open science, and conducting meta-analyses and systematic reviews. Like Denis, Pauline recommended considering secondary data analysis. In her area of clinical psychology, she used data from existing cross-sectional or randomised controlled trials to conduct research. Closure of experimental neuroscience labs gave Niamh an opportunity to think, analyse, submit papers, and catch up on her ever-growing to-do list. In Gavin's area of sport and exercise psychology, the pandemic prompted new avenues for research. This included investigating how the pandemic saw athletes having to train alone, caused sleep issues and changes in motivation, and created a focus on athlete mental health and coping rather than performance.

Collaboration

COVID-19 increased the demand for collaboration in research. For Victoria, school closures and restrictions made it impossible to work directly with children. A move to online research meant that she could work with people in different countries and trial new methods. She encourages reaching out to other researchers, collaborating, and pulling data together. Likewise, Catherine discussed combining data with other labs that are not in lockdowns (for example, in Texas) which enabled her team to work with people from other parts of the world. Denis also discussed how combining data with different labs allowed him to continue his research. Gavin emphasised that collaboration was key to conducting research and establishing links with organisations such as the BPS was central to his research.

Conversely, Niamh admitted that networking and research collaboration opportunities were limited and heavily missed during the pandemic. She also acknowledged that virtual collaboration has made it possible to connect with people you would not normally have the chance to. Whilst the positives of collaboration are clear, Victoria highlighted the importance of considering whether testing and experimental measures are valid across cultures to allow comparison, and to acknowledge potential cultural differences that could influence your results.

Public engagement

The pandemic allowed Victoria to get involved in more public engagement work, and she recently created evidence-based videos for parents on numeracy with her own child. Working alongside Niamh, she created a huge public science experiment involving an online cognitive test and physical activity for the NI Science Festival. The video created for the experiment has since been shared 25,000 times and allowed for the collection of data from a wide range of people.

Recruitment

Recruitment has been impacted in several ways, but one of the core themes discussed across the panel was that moving to online study provided opportunities that would previously have been missed. Niamh stated that online data collection resulted in the removal of geographical constraints when recruiting for participants. Switching to online methods meant that she could recruit more vulnerable stroke survivors which would not have been possible in the lab. Niamh said that more politicians attending online events and conferences helped her team to reach more people and improved the impact of both funded and non-funded research. Additionally, Denis discussed how a move to virtual research meant his PhD researcher could recruit farmers from India and Ireland. Pauline also reported experiencing greater recruitment in some of her studies.

Researcher Wellbeing

Another central topic of conversation throughout the workshop was researcher and staff wellbeing. Particularly how the move away from face-to-face working had the potential to undermine mental health. Isolation was a concern for Denis. He found that isolation could be minimised by talking openly about our struggles, making use of mental health support systems, and taking breaks and leaves of absences if needed. Denis advised where possible to avoid negative self-talk which can be damaging. Enda discussed how regular supportive meetings between researchers and their supervisors was paramount to wellbeing and advocated using mindfulness, and deep breathing during periods of stress. Pauline and Catherine spoke of how working from home has enabled them to spend more time with their pets, which they believe has had a positive impact on their wellbeing.

Moving forward

Moving forward, Catherine highlighted how the pandemic has brought about new, innovative research opportunities. Since dogs' lives have also changed during the pandemic, she is now involved in a new strand of research studying how these changes impact their wellbeing. Thanks to the use of digital collaboration, this strand of research will involve collaborators from York, Melbourne, and Canterbury, NZ. A key take-home message from Victoria was to not get caught up in changing into a "Covid researcher" but to focus on the big questions you would like to answer and your contribution to the research landscape. Finally, Tony recommended that postgraduates should exercise self-compassion at this time, and to remember that we have all overcome the unique challenges brought by the pandemic which is a success in and of itself. Those who may be worried about post-Covid career prospects should view their future in terms of a career path and consider where they want to be at the end, not to worry part way through.

Overall, the workshop provided us with the chance to reflect on the challenges posed by the pandemic. We gained a renewed sense of hope and reassurance for future research. Many speakers had a refreshing and optimistic take on the changes they had to make and saw

opportunity in the face of opposition. We hope that you have enjoyed reading their views as much as we enjoyed listening to them.

Advice for organising a workshop.

We would like to give a special thanks to all our workshop speakers, and to Dr Gillian Shorter who kindly agreed to chair the workshop and supported us throughout. As this was our first time organising a workshop for a conference, we were admittedly nervous. The thought of emailing established researchers within their respective psychology fields felt daunting and imposter syndrome was in full effect. But you would be surprised how willing people are to help if you only ask, and how generous they can be with their time. Creating a plan of how you would like the workshop to run as well as what you would like the speakers to talk about can really reduce your stress. We found that going into the workshop with a clear picture in mind of what it should be like and communicating this with our chair helped us enormously. Upon reflection, we compiled the following advice for conducting your own workshop:

- Choose your chair wisely - The chair's role is vital. The chair needs to be assertive, have good time management skills, be confident, able to think on their feet and engaging! We were incredibly privileged to have had a chair with all these strengths.
- Consider your timings - We opted for 10-minute presentations for each speaker. Although it was difficult for speakers to reduce work in their area to 10 minutes, we do feel that it made the workshop more engaging and reduced the dreaded Zoom fatigue. In hindsight we would have chosen a longer time for Q&A, so this is something to consider if time is permitting.
- Content – We wanted to provide a workshop that would be useful to postgraduates and early career researchers. We were aware that most universities offer a wealth of workshops and training opportunities, so in order to create a unique workshop we asked the opinions of our PhD cohorts. Using the feedback we received, we were able to come up with the idea for this workshop.
- Write a clear blurb - Be sure of what you want the workshop to be about, what you want it to achieve and what you want the audience to get out of it. Write a clear and accessible blurb which summarises the aims of your workshop. We included not just what we wanted it to be, but also what we did not want it to be. This should be sent to speakers well in advance of the workshop.
- Choosing speakers – This point almost goes without saying! Ultimately the audience is going to be listening to the speakers, so choose speakers who will be able to deliver content relevant to your blurb.

If this article has inspired you to consider running your own workshop, you might want to consider our funding opportunities <http://www.psypag.co.uk/workshops/> where you can apply for up to £750 towards creating your own workshop inclusive to all postgraduates (annual deadlines are 21st February, 30th June and 30th October).

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