

Personal Impact Report

Charlie Greenall

Durham University, Psychology Department
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Introduction

I am a final year BSc Psychology student at Durham University, with research interests in body image and eating disorders. For my first summer research project in 2021, I investigated the effect of body dysmorphic traits on body emotion recognition. For my second summer Leadership in Action Project in 2022, I worked with academic staff in Durham University's Psychology Department to lead the development of an asynchronous version of a cognitive dissonance-based eating disorder prevention intervention. In this report, I will outline the outcomes of both projects, as well as the impact they have had on my own leadership and research development, and the future impact they may have on others.

Summer 1 Research Project

My research project was conducted entirely remotely in Durham as a result of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. During my six weeks of research, I was under the supervision of Dr Paddy Ross, who I had weekly virtual meetings with to provide updates on my progress, as well as ask any questions on any aspects of my research I was uncertain of. Dr Ross introduced me to the various elements involved in conducting a research project, including the ethics process, software for study design, and different ways of recruiting participants.

Dr Ross's previous research had focused on body emotion recognition and so he had a lot of experience in the area I wanted to explore. I also wanted to incorporate my interest in body dysmorphia into this research, as it is an area that I feel needs more in-depth research so that treatment can continue to develop. As such, I started to wonder about the possible link of emotion recognition abilities in this group and how it may affect future treatment approaches. After some background reading, it was evident that facial emotion recognition had been explored in this group, and some deficits had been outlined. Based on this, I concluded that researching body emotion recognition in this group would be worthwhile.

During the first week of my research, I completed a short literature review on previous research that had been published on the emotion recognition abilities of those with Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD). This allowed me to gain some insight into what was already known on the subject, as well as the methods by which prior research had been conducted. Following this, I submitted my ethics request for consideration by the Durham University Psychology Department's Ethics Committee. Whilst completing my ethics form I discovered that I would not be able to recruit participants with Body Dysmorphic Disorder without the oversight of a clinician, due to ethical concerns about the psychological impact. As such, after discussion with my supervisor, it was decided that it would be more feasible for me to test participants with only traits of body dysmorphia rather than a full diagnosis of BDD. Due to this minor setback, gaining ethics approval took longer than initially predicted, and

couldn't continue with what I had initially planned. Despite this, I instead spent the time refining my experimental design and writing up some of my research report ready for when I had collected my results.

After gaining ethics approval, I began designing my experiment using Qualtrics before collecting participant responses through Prolifics. The first component of the experiment consisted of a questionnaire assessing whether participants had high levels of Body Dysmorphic traits or low levels. Participants were then divided into an experimental group and a control group accordingly. The second component of the experiment used a series of images that depicted various emotions using body language only. Participants were asked to identify which emotion they believed was being presented to them in the image from five displayed options. After placing my experiment onto Prolifics, I received all my required responses within just 2 hours. After this, it was a case of analysing the results and drawing a conclusion. It was found that those with high levels of body dysmorphic symptoms had deficits in identifying sad emotions from the body alone.

On reflection, my Summer 1 Research Project enabled me to develop my skills in the research methods required for academic research. As this is an area I aspire to venture into once I finish my degree, this has been a great asset to my skill set. I was able to learn to utilise different software to aid my research such as Qualtrics and Prolifics, as well as advance with my statistical analysis techniques through using JASP. In addition to this, I developed my resilience and problem-solving when my initial plan for my experimental group participants was not feasible. While completing this project, I further improved my organisational skills. Fitting a large project into six weeks required accurate planning and being realistic about what was achievable. I was also able to advance my written communication skills through my project outputs. Completing the research report gave me the opportunity to work on writing in an academic style and condensing my findings into a concise, coherent format. Overall, my Summer 1 experience confirmed that a career in academic research is a path I wish to follow and something I believe I will find incredibly fulfilling.

Summer 2 Leadership in Action

My Leadership in Action project consisted of developing an asynchronous version of a cognitive dissonance-based eating disorder prevention intervention. Before starting the project, I knew I wanted to focus my Leadership in Action summer on providing benefits to those with negative body image or eating difficulties. As such, I contacted Professor Lynda Boothroyd and Dr Elizabeth Evans within Durham University Psychology Department. Professor Boothroyd and Dr Evans discussed with me the desire to convert an already successful in-person body image programme called SUCCEED, into an asynchronous online programme so that it could be tested within a research setting. With my PhD ambitions lying within eating disorder treatment research, I knew this project aligned with my future goals and my desire to improve

outcomes for those with eating disorders, disordered eating, or negative body image. As a result, I expressed my keen interest in leading this project over the course of my second summer.

In the first week of my project, I set out to familiarise myself with the existing synchronous body image programme “Succeed”. This was aimed to be delivered in person, in small group settings, and led by a facilitator and peer leaders. The original project took place over two sessions a week apart. My challenge was to take the facilitator booklet and translate the activities into something engaging that could be done online at a participant’s own pace. After making notes on the existing programme, I started to look at other mental health-based online interventions, to see how some of the methods used in those, could potentially be adapted to this intervention. These were then formulated into a database for reference further along the project.

My initial thought for developing this intervention was to utilise Google Classroom. This software is user-friendly, and something I was myself familiar with using. After navigating through the different functionalities available to use on Google Classroom, I developed a plan for how each activity would be presented in the online version of the programme. Unfortunately, after I had populated Google Classroom with two out of the three modules I had planned to create for this programme, I ran into a major setback that would require rethinking my entire plan. For the asynchronous version of the programme to be a success, it needed to require as minimal input as possible from a facilitator. This meant that for each new programme that was run, the facilitator would need to be able to easily replicate the course ready for the new group. With Google Classroom, whilst you could save the individual activities, you had to individually repost every activity one at a time. This realisation caused much frustration as I had already put so much time and effort into developing this programme.

Whilst I knew this was not an ideal situation, I knew it was important to start looking for an alternative right away so that I could still finish the project on time. Given I had some time off during my Leadership in Action project in order to sit my exams, I was able to come back to the project with a fresh mindset. After trying many different alternatives I finally discovered Moodle. This was a complete turning point for my project as the software allowed me to develop activities and layouts that had previously been a mere pipe dream. I populated the site with a newfound sense of confidence and motivation and was able to finish ready for presenting it to my supervisors.

On reflection, my Summer 2 Leadership in Action project definitely pushed me out of my comfort zone. I previously did not have any particular experience with the

software I eventually used for my project, or with building an online programme. As I had almost complete control over the direction and development of the programme, I was able to develop a range of different skills, including leadership, organisation, and time management. I was also able to develop my communication skills and confidence when presenting my work to my supervisors and some PhD students too. Demonstrating a project in this manner is something I had never done before, and it was great to hear feedback and answer questions about my work. My supervisors were impressed with what I had managed to achieve in the six weeks, which further boosted my confidence in my own ability. One PhD student, who was currently working in a school, was also keen to explore how this kind of programme may be able to benefit a younger school-aged demographic. This is just one example of how completing this project could have further benefits long after I have concluded my Laidlaw Programme.

Impact

My first summer research project has provided an area of research that had not been studied before in Body Dysmorphia. As such, I am currently working with my project supervisor to publish my research so that I can share my findings with others in the academic community. My hope is that by sharing this research, it will provide some benefit to those researching treatment interventions for body dysmorphia, and those carrying out more in-depth studies on body emotion recognition.

My second summer Leadership in Action Project has had a considerable personal impact on me. At the end of my project, I was given the opportunity to attend a lab meeting with PhD students and academic staff studying body image and related areas. At the beginning of the meeting, I was offered the chance to present my project to those in attendance. After finishing the presentation, I answered a variety of questions about different aspects of the asynchronous programme I had developed. Initially, I felt hesitant about giving this presentation. Giving a presentation such as this is something that is very out of my comfort zone and causes me to feel anxious. Despite this, after doing this, I felt a notable boost in my self-confidence, social skills, and belief in my ability. In addition to the personal impact this project had on me, this project has the potential to provide lasting benefit to those who struggle with body image issues, or symptoms of disordered eating. By having an asynchronous intervention, it can be accessed by individuals with a range of personal circumstances that may prevent them from attending an in-person synchronous intervention. This could include those in remote locations, those with anxiety, or neurodivergent conditions such as Autism Spectrum Disorder or ADHD, which may make traditional interventions inaccessible. With the launch of the pilot version of this programme, I hope to see this impact.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that taking part in the Laidlaw Programme has provided great benefits in more ways than one. I have been able to develop skills in research that I hope to take forward with me into further education, and eventually into my career. In addition, I have developed my leadership skills by leading a project that will provide benefits in the area of eating disorder prevention. These skills will aid me in not only my education and my future career, but also in my everyday life. I want to thank the Laidlaw Foundation for giving me the opportunity to have this truly enriching experience. I also want to thank my supervisors from both summers for helping me throughout my projects by providing their expertise. I have learnt a great deal from the whole experience.

Word Count: 2088