

Research Spotlight:

Building Health Psychology Connections

By Kharah Ross, PhD (Athabasca)

I spend a lot of time thinking about community, and not just because I'm a health psychologist who studies social relationships and health. As a trainee, I jumped between four different cities across two countries. Each time I landed in a place where I had little by the way of existing community connections. And when you're constantly the outsider trying to find, integrate into or build a community, you become very aware of the importance of community. When I moved back to Canada after a six year absence, I knew I needed the connections and resources a community offers to re-establish myself in Canada. For early career researchers especially, being able to find a tenure-track job, meet collaborators and develop a research program can hinge on having access to a supportive professional community.



Dr. Kharah Ross
Assistant Professor, Health Psychology
Athabasca University

That was how I discovered how hard it is to find the Canadian health psychology community. Canadian psychology has long struggled to differentiate itself from the dominant U.S. psychology, and most professional societies I'm involved with do not have chapters for non-Americans. Moreover, the strengths of health psychology – our diversity, adaptability and wide applicability – are also the very things that make it difficult to track us down. Health psychologists can come from almost any psychology discipline, do not always self-identify as health psychologists, do everything from clinical-focused to academic-focused work, and are housed in almost any department with a health and/or psychology twist. Do a Google search of 'health psychology' and 'Canada' and most of Canada's health psychology does not come up.

It is difficult to connect with – never mind develop, grow or advocate for – a community if it cannot be found or defined. To address this, the CPA Health Psychology and Behavioural Medicine section rolled up our collective sleeves and began to systematically seek out and define the health psychology community in Canada. As a first step, we conducted an environmental scan of all university-affiliated health psychologists in Canada by doing a hand-search of all faculty profiles in all departments, colleges or faculties that could conceivably house a health psychologist. All ~100 universities across Canada were included. Our goals were to get a sense of who health psychologists in Canada are, where they are housed, what contributions they make to research, and whether there is evidence of an integrated Canadian collaborator network or community.

Funded by Athabasca University, the environmental scan produced a list of 280 university-affiliated faculty who did research that encompassed the psychological and health sciences. The project generated three conference presentations and an under-review manuscript. In terms of key findings, first, health psychologists can be found almost across Canada (the exception being the territories, which have one university with no health psychology faculty). The University of

Building Health Psychology Connections

Manitoba's Clinical Health Psychology Department was the largest in Canada, and also unique in that it has a primarily clinical focus. Health psychologists are mostly housed in psychology departments but are also found in some surprising areas, including social work, oncology, education and kinesiology. There are nine psychology departments in Canada with a specific health psychology concentration or focus. Montreal emerged as the largest geographic hub, but the Greater Toronto Area, Ottawa and Calgary were not far behind.

Second, health psychologists in Canada are ridiculously productive. The 280 individuals identified generated ~4,000 research products between Jan 2018 and Mar 2021 alone, amounting to 5 journal articles per faculty member per year. Health psychology research runs the gamut – if you can think of it, someone is probably researching it - with particular strengths in cancer, sleep and pain research. To learn more, visit Ryan Hoggan's poster at the 2022 CPA Convention in Calgary (Saturday June 18th at 10:30 a.m.).

Third, a collaborator network analysis revealed that most health psychology faculty are connected through a common collaborator network that is organized into several sub-networks. Although geography and research topic were important, the most productive sub-networks were built primarily around maintained trainee relationships. To learn more, attend my (Dr. Kharah Ross') oral presentation at the 2022 CPA Convention, scheduled for Friday June 17th at 2:00 p.m.

The environmental scan was just a first step for the CPA Health Psychology and Behavioural Medicine section. Our long-term aims are to explore ways to build and support Canadian health psychology research and community, to showcase Canadian work, and to advocate for health psychology research and practice in Canada. We are working on several follow-up initiatives. For example, we plan to do a survey of the identified health psychologists, to better understand barriers and opportunities for community development. We will also be doing similar work for health psychology trainees and clinicians. The environmental scan list of health psychology faculty will continue to be updated and will be made available to our section's members.

If you're interested in learning more, getting involved, or (like me) are just looking for your health psychology community, we encourage you to attend the CPA Health Psychology and Behavioural Medicine business meeting and reception at the 2022 CPA Convention to be held in June in Calgary, scheduled for Friday June 17th at 15:15 and 16:15, respectively. We're also always looking for new ways to develop our health psychology community. If you want to get involved or have an idea or suggestion, please contact the CPA Health Psychology and Behavioural Medicine section

Chair: Justin Presseau, jpresseau@ohri.ca

Membership Officer: Kharah Ross, kharahr@athabascau.ca

