City University of Hong Kong

Department of Applied Social Studies

Bachelor of Social Sciences in Psychology

Psychology Internship Report (SS3715)

Supervisor: Dr. Kin-Kit (Ben) Li

Yuan CAO
Abstract

I have completed a six-week internship as a research assistant at the Neuropsychology and Applied Cognitive Neuroscience (NACN) Lab, Institute of Psychology, Chinese Academy of Sciences. This is a research centre that focuses on neuropsychology and schizophrenia patients especially. Therefore, my experiences of working at the Lab encouraged me to investigate the extent of contacts and collaborations between researchers and practitioners in the field. Four researchers at the Lab were surveyed. Overall, it was found that the current collaborations between researchers and practitioners in the field of cognitive neuro-psychology in mainland China is far from enough. Current collaborations are limited to doing research or paper writing to be more specific and a main possible reason may be the lack of understanding of each other’s situation or view-point as mentioned by the participants. This imperfect situation will be discussed in more details and some suggestions are given.
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The Scholar-Practitioner Collaborations in the Field of Cognitive NeuroPsychology

Introduction

I have completed a six-week internship as a research assistant at the Neuropsychology and Applied Cognitive Neuroscience (NACN) Lab, Institute of Psychology, Chinese Academy of Sciences (abbreviated as the Lab in the following). This is a research centre that focuses on neuropsychology and schizophrenia patients especially. Therefore, my experiences of working at the NACN lab encouraged me to investigate the extent of contacts and collaborations between researchers and practitioners in the field. In this section of the paper, my experiences during the internship will be summarized with a specific focus on the completion of the learning objectives, and then the main topic for this study will be justified.

There were two types of learning objectives for the internship: academic and personal growth. To have better academic abilities, I would practice the skills I already have (i.e. literature review and simple data analysis) whilst learning new things (i.e. meta analysis coding and event-related potential or ERP administrations). To meet these academic objectives, I was involved in the manuscript preparations for two neuropsychological papers: the coding process of a meta analysis about the emotional experience of schizophrenia patients, and the administration of ERP tests. To have a more personal growth, I would practice building and maintaining a professional and harmonious relationship with co-workers and research participants. Also, knowing what is real research was another main objective for me. These aims were also met during the assistance to the other researchers for the tasks described before. But to meet the last point of understanding the job nature of researchers in the field of neuropsychology, I have made extra efforts such as joining their training sessions delivered by both researchers and practitioners, as well as going to
some clinical settings. Therefore, I had some taste of working at the crossing-point of research and practice, which enlightened my interest for knowing about the collaborations between researchers and practitioners. This internship report provides me with the chance to investigate this question, and thanks to all my co-workers at the Lab, this study was successfully completed and presented next.

**Literature Review**

It may be assumed that since they are all working in the field of psychology, the co-operations between scholars and practitioners are important to spark new ideas or techniques in order to understand a certain mental disease better. From some literatures, however, there seems to be a “science-practice split” (p.985) that prohibits professionals in the same field but different backgrounds working together (Beutler, Williams, Wakefield, & Entwistle, 1995).

There have been some reasons in the literatures for the difficulty in establishing or maintaining collaborations between researchers and clinicians. Practicing psychologists may not be knowledgeable enough about certain research findings that may explain part of the struggles (if any) during collaborations with researchers (Boisvert & Faust, 2006). In a study, mental health workers were found to make only a minimal amount of reference to scientific research when recommending treatments to patients (O’Donohue, Curtis, & Fisher, 1985). It was found that some practitioners do not believe that research findings are confirming the usefulness of psychological treatments when they actually are, which may reflect a certain degree of bias hold by some practitioners about research (Boisvert & Faust, 2006). On the other side of the argument, some suggest it is the scholars who are not putting in enough effort to establish collaborations with practitioners (Beutler et al., 1995). It was reported that practitioners do find
research findings useful and apply them during practice, but scholars are less interested in their counterparts’ practical writings (Beutler et al., 1995). In addition, the usefulness of research could be challenged by the extent of implications and generalizations of empirical findings for practical use (Stricker, 1992). These inconsistent views or findings may be due to differences in the viewpoint of the researchers, or the difference in the sample and the time of the study. Anyhow, no matter who or what it may be, any prejudice held by any member of the two professions must have some impact on the science-practice relation. Therefore, this study attempts to explore if there are any co-operations between scientists and practitioners, and what are obstacles if any. Since there are limited literatures available on this issue in the field of cognitive neuropsychology, and even scarcer about the situation in China, the exploration of this study is significant. My internship agency will be used as a case for exploration and four of its researchers would be surveyed.

**Method**

**Design**

Semi-structured interview was the original design of this study, but this was only actually done on one participant (Researcher 1). Due to the busy time-schedule of the other three participants (Researcher 2, Researcher 3, & Researcher 4), an open-ended qualitative questionnaire was used.

**Participants**

A total of four researchers at the NACN Lab, Institute of Psychology, Chinese Academy of Sciences were surveyed. Two assistant researchers (Researcher 1 and 2) and one post-doctoral
(Researcher 3) were included because they are “teachers” and have more experience of working at the Lab. One doctorate candidate or “student” (Researcher 4) was also involved because she had some clinical practical experience prior to working at the Lab.

Materials

See Appendix A for the questions asked during interview with Researcher 1, and Appendix B for an example of the questionnaire used.

Procedure

First of all, oral consents were given from all participants after an oral description of this study. The interview was conducted prior to the questionnaires because it can better indicate what questions should be included in this study or in the questionnaires. It took place in the NACN Lab during lunchtime that was convenient to Researcher 1. The whole process was sound recorded as allowed by Researcher 1 and was conducted in Chinese. The recording was then transcript and translated into English for analysis. Data was collected from the other three participants using questionnaires. These were sent to and back from the participants via e-mail. The original questionnaires and answers were also in Chinese and later translated into English for analysis.

Results

Data for each theme (or question) are summarised and presented here. However, the original interview and questionnaire data could not be given without the consent of the participants.
Types of collaborations and examples (Q1 in interview and questionnaires)

All four participants have mentioned that there have been collaborations for research projects between researchers and practitioners. To find inpatient samples was mentioned by all participants as the type or reason for collaborations. The need for clinical assessments of participants was also mentioned by three participants (Researcher 1, 3, and 4). One participant (Researcher 4) described the practical advices given by clinical psychologists as another example. Two participants talked about details of collaborations that maybe more beneficial for practitioners; Researcher 2 mentioned researchers offer help about paper writing, and Researcher 4 mentioned that the cognitive assessments during research and the theories that came from research could also benefit practitioners. Only one participant (Researcher 4) talked about co-operations other than research. She had mentioned conferences as the way of communication.

Evaluation of the current collaborations (Q6 in interview and Q2 in questionnaires)

All participants evaluated the current collaborations between researchers and practitioners as inadequate. Two participants (Researcher 1 and 2) mentioned the busy time-schedule of practitioners as the reason. Researcher 1 thought the lack of interest for collaborations during research (due to possible biases) of the practitioners as a reason. Researcher 4 felt the lack of understanding of each other’s job is the reason.

Difficulties during collaborations (Q5 in interview and Q3 in questionnaires)

All participants had mentioned some kinds of difficulties. Two (Researcher 2 and 3) talked about the unwillingness of some practitioners for doing research is the reason for stopping collaborations. The other two participants (Researcher 4 and 1) described the difference in view-
points between researchers and practitioners as the obstacle. Researcher 4 went into more details about the lack of understanding of the practical issues of the researchers as a problem, and issues on funding was another problem mentioned.

*Usefulness of academic papers for practitioners and patients (Q2 & 4 in interviews and Q4 in questionnaires)*

All participants thought the results of research such as academic journals are helpful for practitioners, but this may be limited to those related to medicine, treatment or rehabilitations. Two participants (Researcher 1 and 3) mentioned patients may benefit from research via the knowledge gained by practitioners about the disease when it is well-researched. Researcher 4 added that papers in their own language may be more beneficial for practitioners. Researcher 1 went further and mentioned that the end products of their collaborations with practitioners may not be read by the practitioners, but researchers may read practitioner’s papers occasionally and make corrections for submission to publish.

*Ideas arose from collaboration with practitioners (Q3 in interview and Q5 in questionnaires)*

Only one participant, Researcher 1 described a case for a research topic to come from communications with practitioners (i.e. the importance to study patient’s insight into their own symptoms). All other three did not come across this kind of situations and two (Researcher 3 and 2) suggested the lack of collaborations as the reason.

*Benefits of collaborations (Q6 in questionnaires)*

All participants who completed the questionnaire (i.e. Researcher 2, 3 and 4, since this question was not asked in interview) thought collaborations are mutually beneficial for both
researchers and practitioners, and patients can also benefit indirectly when different neuro-psychological diseases are understood better.

Suggestions for encouraging future collaborations (Q7 in interview and Q7 in questionnaires)

All four participants had suggested that practitioners should recognize the importance of scientific research better, and be more willing to collaborate. Researcher 1 suggested this be realized by changing the assessment of the doctors in hospitals. Researcher 4 was the only one to make some suggestions for researchers. She thought it is important for research to be more related to practice in order to get others interested.

Discussion

Overall, it was found that the current collaborations between researchers and practitioners in the field of cognitive neuro-psychology in mainland China is far from enough. Current collaborations are limited to doing research or paper writing to be more specific and a main possible reason may be the lack of understanding of each other’s situation or view-point as mentioned by the participants. This imperfect situation will be discussed in more details and some suggestions are given as follows.

The lack of interest or co-operations for doing research of clinical psychologists was mentioned by the participants as stopping collaborations. It was found that practitioners tend to over-estimate the effectiveness of the treatment methods they often employ, which may be caused by their selective reading in research findings (Boisvert & Faust, 2006). Therefore, the boarder knowledge of research findings may help practitioners to evaluate different treatment methods more objectively. Since their actual familiarity with research findings could not be
predicted by variables such as years of practicing or field of expertise (Boisvert & Faust, 2006), the motivation and attitude of the practitioners towards expanding their research knowledge seem rather important. Therefore, it should be encouraged for the practitioners to have more passion for research. This requires efforts from both researchers and practitioners to make research be more related to practice. Some have attempted to show the relevance of research to practice overseas (Strupp, 1989). In the past decade, there has been a jump in the number of practical research in Mainland China (Li, Wang, Zhao, & Zhao, 2008). However, the need for theoretical research should never be forgotten (Li et al., 2008), and should be realized by practitioners.

However, it is important to keep in mind that some practitioners may argue against the unfairness of having a heavy work load of doing research on top of their clinical work, especially considering the ignorance of some researchers about the importance of having some practical experiences themselves. It was very interesting that only one participant, Researcher 4, who had some clinical practical experience before doing research, reflected that researchers should also make an effort to encourage collaborations with practitioners by having more understanding about practical issues. It was found that practitioners prefer journal writings as the way of communicating new findings much less than the scholars (Beutler et al., 1995). This also seems to be the situation in Mainland China since all participants other than Researcher 4 had only mentioned research as the way for collaboration. Some practitioners may have some frustrating experiences with getting their papers published in journals. Therefore, collaborations would be difficult if it is limited to paper writings. This is where both sides should make an effort to find new ways of collaboration, especially for the scholars.
It should be reminded that this is only a simple exploration study with many limitations such as restricted sampling and so generations should be made carefully. Further research into this topic should survey practitioners as well as more researchers in order to have a better understanding of the issue.

In some sense, this study was based on but extent from my internship at the Lab. To reflect back to the six-week internship experience, I think that the most valuable knowledge gained is the experiences of being a “true researcher”. I am now in my last year as an undergraduate, and at a point where I should think about what is the next step in life. As most psychology students would do, I hope to continue into postgraduate study, and become a researcher in the future. However, it always confused me about what a researcher could contribute to others, and if the chance for doing practical work is still there when I become a researcher. It is not surprising therefore I have contacted the Lab and asked for this internship opportunity, and carried out this study as a reflection. To be honest, I was disappointed slightly with the results or knowing there may be only a minimal amount of contacts or collaborations between researchers and practitioners in mainland China. However, this gives the future generations a point to work at, and encouraged me to explore further into both fields.

I would like to finish this paper with a thought that had always encouraged me: even thought it may take a long time for scientific research to show its value, once it does, it could be immense for human beings.
References


Appendix A

Questions Asked in the Interview with Researcher 1

1. Are there any communications or collaborations between researchers and practitioners?

2. Would doctors read the articles written by researchers?

3. Have there been any research topics that came from talking with clinical workers?

4. Are journal articles helpful for clinical psychologist or patients?

5. Are there any difficulties during the collaboration with clinical workers?

6. Have there been enough collaborations overall?

7. How to improve the current situation and encourage collaborations?
Appendix B

Questions in the Questionnaire for Researcher 2, 3, and 4

1. What kinds of collaborations between researchers and practitioners there are in the field of cognitive neuropsychology? Could you please give some examples from your own experience of working at the Lab?

2. Do you think the current collaborations between researchers and practitioners are enough?

3. Are there any difficulties during the collaboration with practitioners?

4. Would research findings be any use for practitioners? Will they read or make reference to these journal articles?

5. Have there been any research ideas that came from the suggestions of practitioners? Or from the interaction between scholars and practitioners?

6. Are the scholar-practitioner collaborations beneficial for both sides? Is it beneficial for patients?

7. How to encourage collaborations between scholars and practitioners?