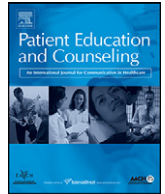




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EACH Pages

Advice for junior researchers – Lessons learned from the 2011 Y-EACH Junior Investigators' Workshop

M. Gemma Cherry^{a,*}, Anne-Linda Frisch^b, Marij A. Hillen^c, Valentina Martinelli^d, Peter F. Pype^e, Isabelle Scholl^f, Nete Schwenessen^g, Kimberly A. Gudzone^h

^a Centre for Excellence in Evidence Based Teaching and Learning (CEEBLT), School of Medical Education, University of Liverpool, Liverpool, UK

^b Institute of Communication and Health (ICH), Department of Communication Sciences, Università Della Svizzera Italiana, Lugano, Switzerland

^c Department of Medical Psychology, Academic Medical Center, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

^d Section of Psychiatry, Department of Health Sciences, University of Pavia, Italy

^e Department of General Practice and Primary Health Care, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium

^f Department of Medical Psychology, University Medical Center Hamburg-Eppendorf, Hamburg, Germany

^g Steno Health Promotion Center, Patient Education Research Team, Gentofte, Denmark

^h Division of General Internal Medicine, Department of Medicine, The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Baltimore, MD, USA

1. Introduction

In September 2011, the second Young European Association for Communication in Healthcare (Y-EACH) Junior Investigators' Workshop was held in Vnà, Switzerland. This workshop supported the goals of EACH and the EACH Early Careers Research Network (ECRN) to promote international collaboration amongst junior investigators and create a network to produce future innovative communication research [1–3]. During this five-day workshop, early-career health communication researchers exchanged ideas and discussed the theoretical, methodological and practical challenges within their current work. An international group of eight junior researchers participated in the workshop, which was facilitated by five senior researchers from the EACH Research Committee (R-EACH). Participants' professional backgrounds were diverse and included disciplines such as psychology, communication, medicine and sociology. The workshop included a mix of lectures by senior members, individual presentations, time for thinking and to work alone, walking in the open air and consultation time with seniors. On the first day, participants presented their current research projects to the group and discussed their interest in and motivation for entering into communication research. Current research projects were explored in more depth on the second day. Each participant was given an hour to present their research and any barriers or difficulties to two seniors and three other juniors, and advice was given. The third day was dedicated to an eight hour walk in the Swiss mountains, which allowed time for reflection, informal discussion and networking, whereas the fourth day allowed participants to work on their research projects and ask for advice where necessary from seniors. Hour-long lectures on theory and endpoints in communication research, placebos and communication, writing grant proposals

and cues and concerns were delivered throughout the week by senior members to contextualise the issues being discussed in the workshop. A workshop was also given on networking and career planning. Participants presented their thoughts of the week on the final day, and time was given for reflection on the week's learning outcomes and future networking possibilities.

The following sections summarise the lessons learned from a combination of discussion and feedback during the workshop, in order to provide advice for other junior researchers.

2. Lesson 1: take a step back to see your research clearly

The workshop enabled the participants to “take a step back” from the day-to-day aspects of their research and consider the bigger picture. Fundamental questions were contemplated: “What was the original question or problem that sparked my interest?”; “What am I actually studying?”; “What kind of methodological and theoretical tools are useful and why?”; “What are the implications for future research and clinical care?”. Junior investigators gained new perspectives on research questions and plans by stepping back from the minute details of the project and instead considering progress and pitfalls. This reflection was essential for the subsequent lessons to occur.

3. Lesson 2: define your aims and research questions

Throughout the workshop, participants were challenged to define what their research questions were, regardless of participants' stage of research. Defining the research questions, coupled with feedback from others, allowed participants to refine what exactly was being investigated and why this was important.

In addition to better characterising their ideas, participants realised the importance of grounding their research questions within the published literature. Junior investigators should start each project with a comprehensive literature review, in order to

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 151 794 5856; fax: +44 151 794 5821.
E-mail address: M.G.Cherry@liverpool.ac.uk (M.G. Cherry).

reduce the risk of duplicating other published literature or research findings. Finally, literature from other disciplines can inspire new hypotheses or illustrate how to apply different methodologies to new areas [4]. Through this process, participants learned that research is not proving what one wants to be proven but rather, as Aristotle learned “explaining what is less well known by what is better known” [5].

4. Lesson 3: use your research questions to inform study design

After stopping to think about what they were investigating, some junior investigators' research plans changed. Others' required rebuilding. Participants were encouraged to trust the research process. Junior investigators were reminded to keep in mind their research questions and aims in order to guide decisions about study design. Seniors advised that if participants developed a solid study rationale that was grounded in previously published literature; then the correct methodology would follow almost logically.

5. Lesson 4: be flexible with your research plan

By taking a step back, participants became more flexible with respect to their research plans and welcomed adjustments to their projects. Many research projects evolved in response to clarifications and changes in the research question. The degree of adjustments varied across all participants. For one, the conceptual model and research design was reformatted and clarified. For others, projects were abandoned which allowed new research questions to develop. The workshop facilitated this flexibility by establishing a supportive environment at the outset. Seniors encouraged participants to ‘express rather than impress’: share doubts, worries and problematic issues, rather than focusing on trying to impress one another with one's research. This atmosphere of trust and openness allowed participants to be receptive to new ideas, creative in their problem solving, and flexible in their thinking.

6. Lesson 5: gain insight by getting away from your environment

By being held in Vná's beautiful, far away surroundings, the workshop removed participants from their usual environment. This change in location facilitated participants' process of gaining a new perspective on their research. First, it enabled many participants to eliminate the time pressures of clinical care, work or family and focus solely on their research. Second, it allowed participants to receive advice from both senior and junior investigators in their field. Discussion with individuals who did not have an investment in their research allowed for more open communication of ideas and provision of constructive, open-minded feedback. Gaining differing opinions added a fresh outlook to the research, which helped participants' generate and develop new ideas. Finally, this feedback gave participants a greater appreciation for how their research is viewed in a broader context.

7. Lesson 6: recognise the importance of networking

Many participants acknowledged how solitary research can be, particularly as a postgraduate student working in a small department. By interacting closely with other international researchers, junior investigators identified similarities between their own and others' current work. As a result, participants created a new international network and formed a Facebook group to keep in touch. This new network plans to apply for collaborative

conference presentations, symposia and grants together in the future.

8. Conclusions

Given the shared challenges revealed during the 2011 Y-EACH Junior Investigators' Workshop, it is likely that the lessons we learned would benefit other junior investigators. This paper summarised the advice for other junior researchers on beginning, executing, and promoting their research.

The strategy of “taking a step back” was critical in facilitating the other lessons learned during this workshop. Giving other junior investigators a similar opportunity to occasionally “take a step back” may help improve the quality of their study designs and research methodology. We also hope that the positive experiences we had may inspire other organisations and programs to create similar workshops that would facilitate learning and collaboration amongst junior investigators. While not all junior researchers will have an opportunity to attend this specific workshop, we would encourage them to find other ways to capitalise on this “taking a step back” method such as applying for similar workshops or organising a retreat themselves. Junior investigators should be encouraged to take time to consider and reconsider their research during their training.



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