



INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATIONS IN BEHAVIORAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

Report of a Workshop (2008)

Finding solutions to many of the world's problems—violence, poverty, chronic disease, poor educational achievement, political alienation— involves changing human behavior. Psychological scientists often work with colleagues in other countries to improve the research base for programs and policies to address these pressing issues. International research collaboration in the psychological, behavioral, and social sciences is critical to improving the quality of peoples' lives, but it can also present numerous challenges. An October 2006 workshop organized by the U.S. National Committee for Psychology and the National Research Council brought together behavioral and social scientists who have collaborated internationally. They considered the

results of a survey of cross-national project leaders and then brought their own experiences to bear in assessing barriers, challenges, and opportunities for international collaborative research in the social and behavioral sciences.

BENEFITS AND OBSTACLES

International research collaborations in the behavioral and social sciences have many benefits, including the potential to: (1) inform theory, methods, policy, and practice in the social sciences; (2) show how behavior is responsive to different settings or contexts; (3) encourage more sensitive ideas about ways to improve health, education, and well-being; (4) provide necessary environmental “variability” to understand children's development or adults' adjustment; (5) provide essential skills relating to research design or language; and (6) offer familiarity with a local population or access to populations undergoing political transition.

Although the benefits of international research collaboration are evident, so are many barriers and hurdles, including the following: (1) international collaboration takes longer; (2) it is often difficult to find funding to plan research or disseminate its findings; (3) there may initially be mistrust within international research teams; (4) eliminating bias in research instruments is difficult; (5) data ownership and access can be problematic; (6) publishing results takes longer; and (7) it is challenging to present the results of international collaborative studies to audiences beyond the academic or scientific community.

ENHANCING INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH COLLABORATIONS

Workshop participants suggested several ways to develop research capacity around the world and to address the challenges that international collaborators encounter.

Advanced Research Training. Opportunities for advanced research training should include a menu of flexible options for researchers of different skill levels and availability, including: workshops focused on a single skill, visiting scholar programs, summer training programs, supplemental or partial graduate training programs, formal graduate degree programs, pre-conference meetings that promote problem-solving discussions and address developmental needs of early-career scholars, and listservs in which early-career scientists can ask questions and solicit advice.

Mentoring. Senior researchers should be available to serve as mentors since preparing and welcoming someone into a community of scholars involves not only imparting skills, but also offering guidance, investing in an individual's development, building trust, and fostering reciprocity.

National Research Centers. Countries with few resources should consider consolidating them in a few national research centers. Institutions should collaborate to attract students at different levels, link dispersed researchers, and increase the visibility of research. These research networks can create forums for learning and foster a common sense of identity.

Communication. Face to face communication through visits to research sites or gatherings at international conferences is critical. E-mail and electronic conferencing are excellent tools for frequent updates, minor adjustments or corrections, and joint editing of texts; however, these methods are insufficient for building the relationships and cultivating the trust and reciprocity that are essential to collaboration.

Cultural Issues. Researchers need to be aware and respectful of cultural differences. Collaborators should have opportunities to share their discomfort with research questions or methods and confirm that the questions they intend to ask are politically sensitive and culturally appropriate. Translations need to be handled carefully.

Data Management. The management of data needs to be improved to facilitate international collaboration, including an explicit agreement among collaborators regarding such matters as handling missing data and incorporating late submissions. Greater resources should be devoted to documenting completed datasets for secondary analysis. Collaborators also need to communicate clearly about ownership of and access to datasets.

Publications. There needs to be better communication about publications resulting from research collaborations. It should be clear how authors' names will appear on the publication, and the research should be published in the languages of the country where the work was done. Efforts should be made to help foreign scholars publish in English-language journals. Finally, editors should be flexible when reviewing submissions from researchers for whom English is a second language.

Dissemination of Information. International research collaborations should try to disseminate their results to audiences beyond academic and scientific communities to governments, policymakers, healthcare providers, educators, or parents. Disseminating research results can reduce skepticism and raise the profile, status, and support for local researchers.

Funding. Funding agencies need to be more flexible. They should consider creating new funding mechanisms to enable early-career scholars to become engaged in international collaborations. Research grants should cover the several phases involved in international collaboration instead of limiting support to data collection, analysis, and publication.

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For More Information

Copies of *International Collaborations in Behavioral and Social Sciences: Report of a Workshop* are available from the National Academies Press; call (800) 624-6242 or (202) 334-3313 (in the Washington metropolitan area), or visit the NAP web site at www.nap.edu. For more information on the project, contact staff at (202) 334-2644 or visit the Policy and Global Affairs web site at www.nationalacademies.org/pqa.