Authorship in Global Mental Health Research: Recommendations for Collaborative Approaches to Writing and Publishing

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ABSTRACT

Background: Collaborations among researchers, clinicians, and individuals with mental illness from high-income countries (HICs) and low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) are crucial to produce research, interventions, and policies that are relevant, feasible, and ethical. However, global mental health and cultural psychiatry research publications have been dominated by HIC investigators.

Objective: The aim of this review was to present recommendations for collaborative writing with a focus on early career investigators in HICs and LMICs.

Methods: A workshop was conducted with HIC and LMIC investigators in Nepal to discuss lessons learned for collaborative writing. The researchers had experience in cross-cultural psychiatric epidemiology, health services research, randomized controlled trials, and projects with war and disaster-affected populations in complex humanitarian emergencies including child soldiers and refugees. Additional lessons learned were contributed from researchers engaged in similar collaborations in Haiti.

Findings: A step-by-step process for collaborative writing was developed.

Conclusions: HIC and LMIC writing collaborations will encourage accurate, ethical, and contextually grounded publications to foster understanding and facilitate reduction of the global burden of mental illness.

Key Words: authorship, developing countries, education, mental disorders, publishing, world health

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INTRODUCTION

In the late 1890s and early 1900s, the first major expeditions in global mental health (GMH) research took place in the form of missions from Europe to the South Pacific.[1] W.H.R. Rivers, a psychiatrist and an anthropologist, and Charles Seligman, an anthropologist, departed from England to travel to the Torres Strait between Australia and Papua New Guinea to study mental illness among remote island populations. A few years later, Emil Kraepelin, considered the father of modern psychiatric classification, traveled from Germany to the island of Java to study mental health in a Dutch-run asylum with Javanese patients.[2]

These trips addressed interesting questions that remain in GMH research today. Rivers' work examined local practices of healing.[3] He later used his study of healing in the Torres Strait to develop treatment for mental health problems among British soldiers who fought in World War I. His work demonstrates that studies in cultural settings far removed from Western society can be instrumental in developing healing practices in Western contexts. Kraepelin's studies with Javanese and later with American Indians and African Americans were attempts to identify what aspects of mental disorders were consistent across cultures and what other aspects were more plastic in the face of culture. He was trying to determine whether his original

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Box 1. Common Mistakes in Global Mental Health Research Publications

There are numerous reasons for inequitable representation of LMIC collaborators in academic publications. Four common mistakes made in GMH collaboration include the following:

1. *No representation at all!* The worst possible outcome is that research collaborators in LMICs are not part of the writing process, or even worse, are part of the writing process but are not included in the authorship list. The solution to this problem is inclusion. A similar problem arises when LMIC collaborators solely participate in paper writing as co-authors and never as first authors. We strongly encourage collaborators from HICs and LMICs to seek ways to facilitate more participation of LMIC researchers in paper writing, including support for lead authorship.
2. *Token representation.* In this scenario, LMIC collaborators are included as authors on papers but are not actively engaged in the writing process. This is not something that is unique to LMIC-HIC collaborations, but it is an important issue now because it can set a precedent in the early stages of GMH's expansion as a field. Token representation also demonstrates a form of devaluing another's contribution. We have struggled with this over the years at TPO-Nepal and have heard comments such as, "I've been on your papers, but some of them I've never actually read." This is a work in progress. The solution to this problem is laid out in the steps below regarding setting expectations and managing duties according to experiences levels.
3. *Exclusion based on fear of biasing results.* A foreign researcher in Nepal told the first author that he/she did not include Nepali research collaborators such as field researchers and translators in paper writing because "If they knew the hypotheses and research questions, it would bias the results. The researchers would only give you what you wanted to find." Although the concept of a "double-blind" in experimental psychology and clinical intervention research is important, it is a separate issue than inclusion of research staff and collaborators in the write-up and publication phase. In our experience, a "blinded" research staff does not improve the quality of the outcomes; it is quite the opposite. Moreover, hypotheses are always accompanied by null hypotheses to create a dialogue that the outcomes could go in different directions. At TPO-Nepal researchers are ideally open to any outcome they may find. Because of this openness, we have had community researchers come back from field sites with very different ideas than our original hypotheses.
4. *Language barriers.* A colleague recently said, "I know Mr. X doesn't speak or read English; why is he one of your co-authors?" A common reason that collaborators may not be included in paper writing is the issue of a language barrier. Some collaborators are not going to be able to contribute directly by drafting or editing sections of text in English. The solution to this problem is the inclusion of a translator during the paper writing process. When budgeting for projects and translators, strongly consider budgeting for translation during the paper writing process.

observations of mental disorders in Germany represented common pathways of psychopathology versus an epiphenomenon of German culture.

However, these missions, like much of anthropology and cross-cultural psychiatry until recently, represent extractive approaches. There was no involvement of indigenous residents in the Torres Strait or Java in the analysis and dissemination of knowledge acquired during these missions. This was in part due to attitudes related to cognitive primitivism of non-European groups,[4] lack of educational infrastructure in these settings, and limitations in communication and technology.

Today, with higher literacy rates, greater interconnectivity, and autonomous rather than colonial governance, collaborations rather than extractions should be the standard of practice. However, there is still a long way to go for comparable representation of research collaborators between low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) and high-income countries (HICs). Although research assistants, translators, and collaborations across multiple levels are crucial to the conduct of GMH research, representation in the writing and publication process is lacking (see Box 1 for common mistakes in GMH publications).

The aim of this article is to provide an introduction to collaborative manuscript writing for young researchers to prepare for journal submission. Although basic guidelines for the steps of this process are widely available,[5] our focus is using a collaborative ethical approach, with a special emphasis for LMIC—HIC collaborative writing. The inclusion of LMIC collaborators in both the research and writing process has numerous benefits including more accurate description of methods, context, and limitations in conducting the research; greater linguistic proficiency in explaining language use and cultural adaption of instruments and interview guides; more appropriate interpretation of findings; more realistic assessment of feasible applications of findings; and advancement of career goals for LMIC research partners.

This article is a result of a collaborative writing and publishing workshop conducted at Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TPO) Nepal, where experienced, mid-career, and field researchers from HICs and LMICs participated. We brainstormed and identified challenges in academic writing specifically for the LMIC researchers and came up with a list of suggestions that