



Knowledge acquisition and research evidence in autism: Researcher and practitioner perspectives and engagement



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ABSTRACT

Background: Government policy and national practice guidelines have created an increasing need for autism services to adopt an evidence-based practice approach. However, a gap continues to exist between research evidence and its application. This study investigated the difference between autism researchers and practitioners in their methods of acquiring knowledge.

Methods: In a questionnaire study, 261 practitioners and 422 researchers reported on the methods they use and perceive to be beneficial for increasing research access and knowledge. They also reported on their level of engagement with members of the other professional community.

Results: Researchers and practitioners reported different methods used to access information. Each group, however, had similar overall priorities regarding access to research information. While researchers endorsed the use of academic journals significantly more often than practitioners, both groups included academic journals in their top three choices. The groups differed in the levels of engagement they reported; researchers indicated they were more engaged with practitioners than vice versa.

Conclusions: Comparison of researcher and practitioner preferences led to several recommendations to improve knowledge sharing and translation, including enhancing access to original research publications, facilitating informal networking opportunities and the development of proposals for the inclusion of practitioners throughout the research process.

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What this paper adds?

This study presents the first evidence of similarities and differences between researchers and practitioners in the methods they use to gain research knowledge of autism. In a novel questionnaire completed by over 600 researchers and practitioners, individuals were asked to indicate the methods that they used to keep up-to-date with research as well as methods that they felt would be beneficial in increasing practitioners' access to research evidence. They were also asked to what extent they engaged with the other group.

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The study showed that practitioners differed from researchers in the methods they used to access information, but had similar overall priorities about what would be beneficial to increase research knowledge for practitioners. The results directly contributed to, and extended, existing literature on research-users' preferences regarding topic areas that should be prioritized for research investigation. It also replicated findings showing different perspectives in the levels of engagement experienced, with researchers perceiving that were more engaged with research-users than vice versa.

The findings from this research highlight potential targets for change in the task of bridging the gap between research and clinical, educational, and policy-based practice. The recommendations include enhancing access to original research publications, facilitating informal networking opportunities and the development of proposals for the inclusion of practitioners throughout the research process.

1. Introduction

Government policy and national practice guidelines have highlighted an increasing need for professionals working in autism services to adopt an evidence-based approach in the delivery of diagnostic methods and clinical and educational interventions. However, a gap continues to exist between research knowledge and its application in practice (Parsons et al., 2013; Reichow, Volkmar, & Cicchetti, 2008). One factor that may contribute to this gap is a difference between academic and non-academic professional groups in their approach to acquiring knowledge of autism research.

Practitioners' views about what counts as a credible knowledge source is historically influenced by their training and experience (Rycroft-Malone et al., 2004). They may, therefore, routinely use different methods from those used by researchers when updating their specialist professional knowledge and have different views about how they could potentially benefit from research evidence in the future. Greater understanding of these perspectives is therefore important for researchers who are aiming to adapt scientific evidence to meet the needs of the wider, non-academic community (Lemay & Sá, 2014).

Effective knowledge translation into practice depends on effective facilitation by researchers (Kitson, Harvey, & McKormack, 1998; Rycroft-Malone et al., 2004), a goal that has been heightened by government policy in recent years by the impact assessment of academic research (e.g. Research Excellence Framework, 2014; <http://www.ref.ac.uk/>). It has been argued that attempts to bridge the research-practice gap need to involve greater collaboration between autism researchers and research-users, such that both communities are engaged in the research process from the beginning (Parsons et al., 2013). Such collaborative activity, or engagement, can facilitate co-participation in the development of research design and method through reciprocal exchange of knowledge. Engagement between researchers and the people who use research is a central component of interactive models of knowledge translation in health policy (Jacobson, Butterill, & Goering, 2003) and a key facilitator of effective knowledge translation (Huberman, 1990). It enables the researcher to orient towards the needs of the user group, provides opportunities for discussion about the values and interpretation of evidence, and helps to facilitate trust and collaboration between researchers and research-users (Milton, 2014; Parsons et al., 2013).

Recent research studies in the field of autism have highlighted the importance of developing a research agenda that is oriented towards the research-user. This work has identified topic areas that research-users prioritize as important areas for future research (Pellicano, Dinsmore, & Charman, 2013; Pellicano, Dinsmore, & Charman, 2014a). Results showed that although researchers and research-users agreed on some of the priorities for future research in autism, there was also a mismatch in priorities for other areas. This research also reported a mismatch in the level of engagement reported by researchers and research-users in the field of autism (Pellicano et al., 2013; Pellicano, Dinsmore, & Charman, 2014b). While academic researchers perceive themselves to be engaging with non-researchers, the same view is not held by non-research users of research.

The findings above emphasize that research should focus on priority areas that meet the needs of the research-user community, a goal more likely to be fulfilled by improved engagement between researchers and non-researchers. The focus of the current study was not on priorities for what should be researched, as previously studied, but on the process of knowledge acquisition. To investigate this, similarities and differences in the methods and preferences for acquiring knowledge used by researchers and research-users were examined, targeting individuals from one sector of the autism research-user community: professional practitioners working in clinical, educational and policy settings. In this respect our definition of 'research-user' is consistent with the definition used by Lemay and Sá (2014) in a study of the translation of research evidence into professional practice. If methods of knowledge acquisition differ, and researchers present evidence in ways that are incompatible with the preferences of practitioners, communication will be inhibited and the translation of research evidence impeded. Therefore, greater understanding of the gap between research and practitioner groups in both their current practice and future preferences will facilitate conditions for collaborative engagement that starts from a more common ground and enable reciprocal exchange.

The current questionnaire study formed part of the development work for an online web-based initiative being designed for the purpose of connecting research, practice, and policy communities. In a set of three questions, researchers and professionals working in practice communities were asked about how they use research information. First, both groups were asked how they currently keep up to date with information in the field of autism. Second, both groups were asked which methods they thought would be beneficial to increase research access and research knowledge for research-users. This question necessarily focuses on the translation of information *from* researchers *to* research-users, to help explore issues about the inadequacy of the communication of research evidence to non-research professionals. Finally, researchers and

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