

Facilitating the Development of a Scientist-Practitioner Identity Position in Clinical Psychology Training: Pedagogical Implications

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Introduction

The journey undergone during the course of obtaining a doctorate has a profound and complex effect on the candidates' identity, both personally and professionally (Burgess et al., 2011; Fenge, 2012). The professional identity transition that occurs during the course of a Professional Doctorate (PD) is particularly complex because those deciding to do a PD are likely to already be practitioners, some of whom may have previous negative experiences with the concept of 'science-lead' practice (Corrie and Callanan, 2001). Therefore, these individuals come into the doctorate with a strong sense of identifying with their profession, and possible preconceived ideas about what it means to be a 'researcher'. In fact, the choice to do a PD as opposed to a PhD often lies in this identity and the desire to remain identified with their profession (Fenge, 2012). Therefore, a typical PhD journey may often lead to an identity transition from 'student' to 'researcher' whereas, a PD journey is more likely to lead to a tension between identities, which may be in conflict (Burgess 2011) or a dual identity of 'practitioner' and 'scientist/researcher', which facilitates the ability to integrate research with practice (Corrie and Callanan, 2001, Wellington and Sikes, 2006).

The research-practice (or science-practice) gap is a commonly observed and written about phenomenon in a range of applied disciplines. The current paper focuses on the research-practice gap in practitioner clinical psychology doctoral training and the struggle with identity transition that clinical researchers undergo throughout the course of their professional doctorate. In the UK, clinical psychology trainees are recruited and trained in a national context that emphasises the importance of the scientist-practitioner identity position. Clinical psychology trainees are expected to become leaders in research development within the National Health Service (NHS) and to be sophisticated consumers and producers of evidence-based research. In the course of their training, however, clinical psychology trainees are inevitably met with varied views about what constitutes evidence, the value of research to practice, and how these two domains of knowledge can and might work together. They also enter training with their own views about what constitutes legitimate ways of producing knowledge in clinical psychology and the ways in which they can and should evidence their own practice. Clinical training programmes, therefore, need to develop learning experiences through which trainees might be facilitated to reflect on and develop their identity position as a scientist-practitioner.

Methods

Using critical incident technique (CIT; Flanagan, 1954) the defining academic, applied and personal incidents that doctoral clinical trainees perceive have allowed them to, or have inhibited them from, integrating the knowledge structures of clinical research and practice were identified.

A survey was developed to understand trainees' current identification as a 'scientist-practitioner' and their perception as to how the connection between these two aspects of identity had either been facilitated or undermined during the course of training. This was achieved in two main ways: by asking trainees to identify critical events or moments in training and indicating what it was about these events that either promoted or weakened the connection between science and practice; and, by asking them whether it is possible to train people to become scientist-practitioners. Questions also elicited views regarding changes in self-perception and practice that arise from becoming a scientist-practitioner.

Initial Results and Discussion

The findings suggest that by the end of their doctoral journey, clinical trainees identified themselves as scientist-practitioners, while none indicated having this identity at the onset of their training. This is a much greater percentage than has been seen in previous studies, suggesting that the training programme investigated in this study more successfully facilitates identification with the scientist-practitioner model than others (Corrie and Callanan, 2001). Importantly, trainees also identified specific ways in which their practice has been enhanced by this scientist-practitioner identity. Clinical trainees highlighted the importance of supervisor guidance and reflective practice during the development of the scientist-practitioner identity. Similar elements were highlighted as important to identity development and research lead-practice in both clinical psychology and in education doctorate programmes (Corrie and Callanan, 2001, Fenge, 2012), suggesting these are key elements within PD programme which are critical to enabling doctoral candidates to integrate this new identity as a scientist/researcher with their professional identity.

A consistent theme is that pedagogy in both the academic and placement context contribute to reinforcing the scientist-practitioner position. Ideally, these pedagogies will be congruent; however, there is evidence that conflicting positions can also promote adherence to the model and that trainees will develop the scientist-practitioner position outside of formal learning situations. This is a positive finding given that it is evident from both anecdote and published evidence that trainees will encounter resistance to the scientist-practitioner model and that this will represent an on-going challenge to the development of their identity (Gee, 2000, Burgess et al., 2011).

The data suggest that training programmes have an important role in supporting identity development outside of the placement context and equipping trainees to hold it when they encounter challenge. However, the data also imply that how a training programme conveys the scientist-practitioner position through its pedagogy and the assumptions underpinning the way it is operationalized are important, as are trainees' own assumptions about what constitutes 'research' and 'practice'. Some trainees perceived that practice legitimately involves intuition, creativity and having one's own opinions whereas research does not. The findings reported here suggest that some trainees perceive that the training programme endorses specific ways of being a scientist-practitioner and ones which rule out innovation and creativity, for example, by way of tick-box evaluations. These viewpoints invite consideration of how training programmes promote their underlying philosophies through pedagogy, supervision and assessment methods.

Main Points for Discussion

- Have other Professional Doctorate programmes observed tensions between 'scientist/researcher' and 'professional/practitioner' identities in their doctoral researchers (including trainees, lecturers, supervisors, tutors, and so on)?
 - If so, why do such tensions exist?
 - How have you coped with these tensions?
- How can the pedagogy of a programme support doctoral researchers' (trainees only?) development of a researcher identity alongside an already established professional identity?
 - What helps and what hinders the development of a research-practitioner identity?
 - How can we discourage dualist approaches to the development of a research-practitioner identity?

References

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