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From curiosity to contribution: reflections of a junior researcher on his journey into mental health research in Iraq

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Received: 2023-01-10; Accepted: 2023-02-27
DOI: 10.52095/gpa.2023.6210.1066

Abstract

This article presents a personal reflection on the journey of a junior researcher in the field of mental health and psychiatry from the initial spark of curiosity to make a significant impact in his field. It highlights key factors that contributed to the researcher's success, including mentorship, persistence, and willingness to learn from failure. The article also explores the challenges faced by the researcher, such as lack of resources. The article concludes with recommendations for aspiring young and mid-career researchers to follow in the footsteps of the author. The present article is organised chronologically and spans the period from childhood research curiosity to the current position as a researcher in the field of psychiatry and mental health. The article is divided into 12 main sections: fundamental research curiosities, interest in mental health research, learning from literature, the status of mental health research in Iraq, why should it matter that we invest in mental health research in Iraq, first publication, making connections to help, challenges, rewards, strategies for success, advice for researchers, and future directions.

The hope is that this personal journey inspires and informs others with a similar enthusiasm for research and studies in mental health.

Keywords

Research journey, Iraq, Kurdistan, Mental health, Goal, Success, Junior researcher

INTRODUCTION

Fundamental research curiosity

Since childhood, I have always wanted to become a scientist to learn new things and make unique discoveries. I liked to solve puzzles and develop my metaphysical perspective. I remember that during summer when I used to sleep on the roof of our house, the sky was clear and as shiny as a mirror. I remember watching the sky and stars because I was fascinated to learn how large and how far the universe was from Earth. This gave me the desire to understand extraterrestrial life and to become an astronaut. I figured out two silly astronomical challenges at my age when I was a kid.

First, when I was only five years old, when I watched the sky at night in the summer, I noticed that one of the stars was moving rapidly. I was shocked and terrified to find that one star was moving and the others remained static. When I went to ask my father about this unusual

phenomenon, he replied saying “mangî dast krd” which means spaceship – then I found out about the International Space Station. I was glad that he gave me the solution and extended my limited knowledge of astronomy. Then I told everyone in my friendship group about ‘mangî dast krd’.

Second, when I played football with my friends on a foggy day, I saw something strange in the sky. I realised that the moon was moving at the same time as I was, so that every time I was moving, the moon was also moving. At this crucial moment, my father saved me again. I shouted at him and told him that I had noticed something strange in the sky. The moon moves so fast. My father smiled and said: “My son, the clouds are moving; it is not the moon; it is just an illusion between you and the moon, because the clouds are moving due to the wind, but you believed the moon was moving. Actually, the moon moves, but not very fast, just as you saw.” For a moment, I was stunned and silent, and then I gently turned my face to the sky and said inwardly, “Yes, that is it, the clouds lied to me.” And from these

moments, I've been interested in discovery and science.

These two examples may seem ridiculous, but they represent childhood wonder and how much I was curious and anxious to learn and understand right from the start of my life. As a result, this childhood experience inspired my fundamental desire to investigate, to discover, to understand difficult puzzles such as learning about the universe, human nature and metaphysics. I believe that the universe and humans are two sides of the same coin, and that we are only at the beginning of our understanding.

OBJECTIVE

As a junior researcher, I have faced various challenges during my journey to success. However, with perseverance, hard work, and dedication, I have been able to overcome these challenges and make significant contributions to my research skills and my field of study. In this article, I will share my research journey and the challenges I faced along the way, as well as the strategies that helped me succeed.

My research interest in mental health and psychiatry

Psychiatry and mental health are fascinating areas of research that have intrigued me for years. As a young researcher, I was driven by a natural curiosity to understand the world around me. My journey into the field of mental health and psychiatry began with a personal interest in understanding the complexity of human behaviour, mental processes and the factors that influence mental health and well-being. My passion for mental health research was fuelled by the realisation that mental health is a critical component of overall health and well-being that affects millions of people around the world. Therefore, understanding the causes, symptoms, and effective treatments for mental health disorders is crucial to improving the quality of life for those affected individuals and their families.

During my undergraduate studies, I had the opportunity to participate in some research projects. These experiences inspired me to continue researching and, eventually, I decided to focus on psychiatry and mental health research. However, I learnt that research is not only about discovering new knowledge but also about communicating that knowledge effectively to others. As I progressed in my research journey, I learnt the importance of collaboration, mentorship, and hard work in achieving success in academia.

Learn from the literature

Research and academic success are well documented in the literature. They were informative and inspiring in shaping my journey as a researcher. One of the most important aspects of the research journey is curiosity. Researchers are curious about the world around them and always asking questions (Aschbacher et al., 2010). They are constantly seeking new knowledge and trying to understand how things work. This curiosity drives them to explore new ideas and ask questions that have never been asked before. These are the things that impressed and influenced me. I would recommend that any reader take inspiration from the whole process of the research journey and be curious about the science and theories that are presented in the literature.

Status of mental health research in Iraq - when I started

When I started doing research, I noticed several gaps and challenges in the study of mental health in Iraq and Kurdistan. This was due to the lack of consideration of mental health and psychology generally within the medical sector, the lack of scientific studies on mental health issues, and a lack of resources available within the country. Furthermore, there were insufficient published studies by local or foreign researchers (non-Iraqi researchers) or Iraqi researchers living and studying in western countries that did not fill this gap. Furthermore, almost all studies were cross-sectional and observational, and almost no systematic reviews or meta-analysis studies had been conducted. The quality of most of the studies was not scientifically sound; they looked like a graduation project, such as using samples of 100 subjects from college students or people from specific settings to know the prevalence of some psychiatric disorders, mainly depression. To my knowledge, my systematic review of mental health problems in Iraq (Ahmed, 2022d), is considered the first systematic psychiatric review study published in Iraq.

Why should it matter to invest in mental health research in Iraq and Kurdistan?

One of the main factors that inspired me to focus on mental health research in my country is the fact that mental health care is still quite insufficient in Iraq and Kurdistan, and yet the need is very high (Ahmed, 2022c). Tens of thousands of people still live in refugee and internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. There are more IDPs than refugees. Their towns and villages were destroyed or the places are still too dangerous

to live in. More specifically, the genocide of Kurdish people through chemical attacks by the past Iraqi regime in the 1980s and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria invasion (ISIS) in 2014, involving areas of northern Iraq, led to chronic and significant trauma associated with tremendous brutality, especially toward the Yazidi people, resulting in increased psychiatric disorders, suicide, and domestic violence. These devastating and prolonged events prepose a significant risk factor to mental health of all generations, but especially pose a significant threat to mental health for the present generation (Ahmed, 2022b). All these factors require the urgent attention of mental health researchers and professionals in terms of prevention and intervention.

My first publication journey

At the very beginning of my undergraduate studies, I decided to write my first paper about thanatophobia and how Muslims and Christians approach death (Ahmed, 2022e). Inspiration came from an international paper with similar objectives that I read. It was exceptionally well written, and I could understand everything technically. I decided to conduct the same research as my first study; it was poor. After initial rejection, I learnt and, with constructive comments from the peer reviewers, it was ultimately published in the Journal of Global Psychiatry Archives in 2022. I had started drafting it in 2015.

Making connections to assist

Starting out, I struggled alone without research professionals around me. Having a team or a mentor to guide you is important because what I studied at university was unsatisfactory compared to what I found in international contexts. So, I tried to find or connect to a scientific setting in this regard, but initially, I couldn't find any professionals who could assist me or supervise me to publish scientific articles. I knocked on many doors to hold my hands and help me, but I was the only person there who was confident, strong, and intuitive. I set my life goals in my head and had a clear mission and vision. I put a lot of effort and dedication into teaching myself and expanding my research knowledge to advance my goals.

Fortunately, I found support through a persistent effort that required extensive communication, as I sought the mentoring that I understood I needed. As a result, I did find a mentor and subsequently published numerous articles, as well as serving as a reviewer and editor for

journals with a good reputation and developing my research abilities. My publications focused on filling mental health gaps in Iraq and Kurdistan. Publications have been both systematic reviews and original, such as my latest unusual finding, the ISIS syndrome (Ahmed, 2022; Ahmed, 2022a). Ultimately, I was lucky enough to know Professor Reinhard Heun (who was my early mentor) who supported me to improve my research skills through his contractive comments and critiques. He has a gentle vision and a goal to promote mental health in underprivileged countries and to support authors around the world.

Challenges

My journey to become a researcher was not without its challenges. For instance, I had to balance the demands of coursework, research, and clinical training, while also maintaining a work-life balance. I also faced some obstacles in terms of funding, resources, mentorship, and access to bibliographical databases.

The following were the challenges that I faced:

Lack of research experience: as a young researcher at the beginning of the journey, I had limited experience conducting academic research that met the requirements of high-impact journals.

I had to learn how to design and conduct experiments, analyse data, and write scientific papers. This lack of experience was a significant challenge and required me to spend extra time reading research papers, attending workshops and training sessions, and seeking advice from experienced researchers.

Funding: funding was also a significant challenge for me. Conducting research can be expensive, and as a young researcher, I had limited access to research funds. To overcome this challenge, I had to learn how to write successful grant proposals, create a database of good journals with free publication fees, and look for alternative sources of funding.

Time management: balancing research with other responsibilities, such as personal life, capacity building, study, work, and administrative duties was another significant challenge. Time management became a critical skill that I had to develop to ensure that I was making progress in my research projects.

Competition: in the highly competitive field of research, I faced significant competition from other researchers. I had to learn to differentiate my research

and make it stand out from other similar studies.

Rewards

Despite the challenges, conducting research in mental health and psychiatry has been an incredibly rewarding experience. The potential to make a real difference in the lives of people affected by mental health disorders is significant. Research can inform, policy, and practise, leading to improvements in treatment options and enhancing the quality of life of affected individuals and their families.

Strategies for success

My research journey was shaped by a variety of factors, including mentorship, persistence, and willingness to learn from failure. I also had many opportunities to collaborate, attend conferences, publish articles, and present my work to different audiences. I learned to be resilient, resourceful, and proactive in seeking opportunities that aligned with my goals and values.

The following methods were particularly effective in helping me achieve success in my research:

Seek mentorship: finding a mentor who is knowledgeable and supportive can make a difference to a young researcher's success. It is very lucky to find an experienced mentor to accompany you on your journey, who can provide guidance, support, and invaluable feedback on your research.

Be persistent: research is often filled with setbacks, failures, and rejections. Persistence and not giving up in the face of adversity are the keys to success. I learnt to view failure as an opportunity to learn and grow, rather than an outright rejection.

Time management skills: developing effective time management strategies helped me balance my research with other responsibilities, such as study, work, and my personal life. Prioritising tasks, setting goals, and creating a workable schedule were essential skills that can help maximise productivity and reduce stress.

Collaborate with others: collaboration can be an effective way to expand your research skills, gain new perspectives, and produce high-quality research. I have not had the opportunity to work with a large group of experts, but I learnt from the collaboration over mentorship.

Attend conferences and workshops: attending conferences and workshops provided me with opportunities to learn new research findings and techniques, inspire other researchers, and showcase my research.

Advice for young and junior researchers

Being a scientist and researcher requires dedication, hard work, and investment in yourself. I have found that to be a good researcher you must have certain abilities and skills. Based on my journey, I offer some advice to young and mid-career researchers. *Firstly*, look for mentors and role models who can guide and support you in your academic and professional pursuits. *Secondly*, be open to learning and growing and willing to take risks and embrace challenges. *Thirdly*, prioritise self-care and well-being and seek out activities and relationships that nourish your mind, body, and soul. *Fourthly*, be curious, creative, and passionate about your research questions and clinical work, and strive to make a positive impact on the lives of others.

Table 1. The researcher needs and researcher tips

Researcher needs	Research tips
Good language skills (e.g., English)	Do not rush in publishing
Good writing skills	Accept criticism and rejections
Good computer skills	Dream big but step small
Good mathematical and statistical skills	Go for quality not quantity
Creative mind	Move away from redundant topics and try working on significant gaps or problems
Precious vision	Truth is better than outcomes, the truth should come first in your research
Good to find problems	Do not get disappointed
Good problem solver	Being patient
Positivity	Never give up

Additionally, be aware of keywords if you want to improve your citations and focus on them in your manuscript

I developed a table of needs for those who want to be a researcher; that includes *researcher needs* and *researcher tips*. These are things I gained from my research experience in the hope of inspiring you to follow and master your research skills.

Future directions

Moving forward, I plan to continue to develop and evaluate novel interventions for the treatment of mental health disorders. My long-term goal is to address significant gaps in mental health and related fields, to help my society, even humanity, live in peace and enjoy their well-being. I will also start research training initiatives to introduce scientific studies to young and mid-career researchers and increase awareness of research in my country. I would like to offer help to anyone who wants to do research, since I am aware of the suffering that results from not having a mentor to guide you through your journey. Let us hope that more mental health researchers contribute to the field, reduce stigma, and increase awareness of mental health needs. Let's hope that mental health services will be more accessible and less neglected in the medical field. This will require greater interest from the national medical and public services community in the country.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I express my sincere gratitude and appreciation to my mentor for his invaluable guidance and unwavering support throughout my research journey.

“Dear Prof Reinhard Heun, I just wanted to take a moment to express my deep gratitude and appreciation for all the support and guidance you have provided me. Your mentorship has been invaluable to me and has helped me grow both personally and professionally. Your wisdom and insight have truly made a difference in my life, and I am very grateful for your time and effort. Thank you for being an amazing mentor and for everything you do!”

CONCLUSION

My journey to becoming a researcher has been both challenging and rewarding. Throughout my journey, I faced numerous challenges, including a lack of scientific research experience, limited funding, resources, and partnerships. However, by developing effective strategies for success, such as capacity building, mentoring, attending conferences and workshops, and publishing high-quality research

papers, I was able to overcome these challenges and make significant improvements and contributions to my research skills and field of study. The journey towards becoming a successful researcher is never easy, but with hard work, dedication, and perseverance, it is possible to achieve your goals. I am grateful for the opportunities and experiences that have shaped my career and I am excited for future possibilities to advance our understanding and treatment of mental health problems. I hope that my journey can inspire and inform others who share a similar passion for research and mental health studies.

DECLARATIONS

Conflict of interest: no conflict of interest is to be declared.

Ethical approval: not relevant.

Funding: none.

Informed consent: not applicable.

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