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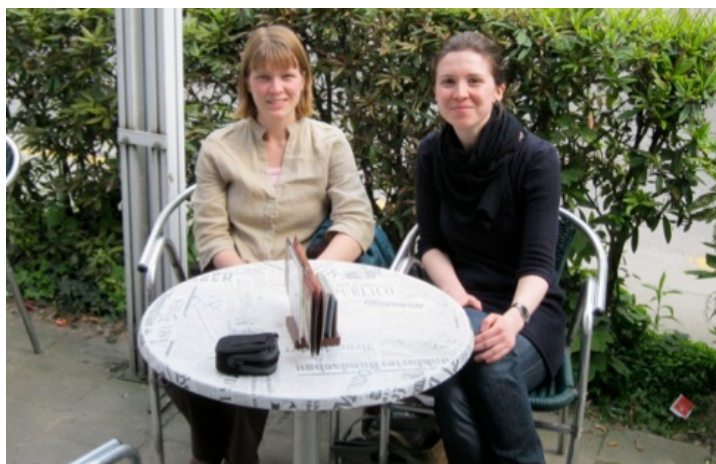
Visiting scholar grant report: A research project on chronic pain and social exclusion

Report on the research visit at Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, 4 – 16 April 2011

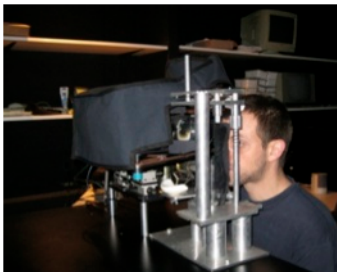
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Chronic pain is difficult both for patients to tolerate and for various health professionals to treat effectively. Management of chronic pain population still faces many challenges and requires novel approaches in the treatment of pain. The Pain Clinic of University Hospital Split and the Laboratory for Pain Research University of Split were particularly interested to further explore social contextual factors that contribute and sometimes maintain chronic pain conditions. Therefore this research visit was particularly oriented towards a collaborative project that aims at exploring contributing effects of social exclusion on pain perception. Chronic pain patients often face problems with everyday functioning and social interactions to more executive functions such as working memory, decision-making and emotional processes.

Further on, the perceived lack of understanding or social support can sometimes lead to the feeling of stigmatization in chronic pain patients, which in addition impacts both their disease severity and their social relationships. Due to these factors chronic pain patients are potentially more likely to experience social exclusion, which increases with the level of their disability. This particularly has repercussions for chronic pain patients who are experiencing social exclusion processes due to the conflict with closer social surroundings as well as professionals involved in their treatment. The results of several studies suggest that chronic pain may alter pain perception. There is also a reason to believe that the pain of social exclusion shares some of the same neural and psychological mechanisms as the experiences of physical pain. These shared mechanisms include the anterior cingulate cortex, periaqueductal gray matter, brain structures and the opioid systems. However, consistent findings on how social support in chronic pain patients can influence pain perception and empathy are lacking. This study would provide more information how to provide adequate support for individuals with chronic pain affected by social exclusion processes. This research visit embraced the overall developmental strategy of the Pain Clinic University Hospital Split, which prioritizes interdisciplinary research in chronic pain. The research visit to the Faculty of Psychology at Katholieke Universiteit Leuven was concentrated on gaining knowledge and methodology of



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Experimental Psychology Lab

chronic pain management, as well as experimental methodologies that could be used in the context of health psychology. Prof Dezutter gave

me an opportunity to join the weekly meetings and methodology seminars with the entire research group. Furthermore, during our meetings I could participate in discussions after doctoral seminars, which was a very stimulating experience.

Work plan and activities of the visit

The basic purpose of this visit was to demonstrate that chronic pain patients affected by social exclusion processes become relatively numb to physical pain. Therefore, we discussed different aspects of our research design: association between chronic pain, personality traits and responsiveness to experimentally induced painful stimuli. Particular accent was placed on developing the proposal for a methodology for studying the association between social exclusion and pain. The first part of the study included testing the basic associations and the instruments to be used. The first week was dedicated to extensive literature study on the theoretical framework for my work. The second part of the visit included working on a draft version of our experimental design and participating in experimental psychology seminars, discussions with other colleagues from both the Health Psychology and the Experimental Psychology departments which proved to be of tremendous importance. Also, my supervisor at university of Leuven Prof Dezutter and myself were very interested to prepare a poster we could present at the Symposium on pain and suffering in Leuven on May 13th 2011.

Outcomes of the visit

The research design on social exclusion processes in the context of chronic pain developed with Prof Dezutter made a valuable impact on my development as a young researcher. Social exclusion is a rather important issue to tackle considering the fact that social exclusion processes cause an assortment of outcomes, many of which forestall distress and various pathological changes in cognition, emotion and behaviour. Working with Prof Dezutter, I was able to benefit from her wide experience in research regarding chronic pain patients, and since the time we established communication, she offered valuable support and provided me with useful learning materials, which additionally helped me advance my research design. Apart from that, the research group in Leuven offered a rich learning environment, where I was able to participate in weekly meetings and methodology seminars and establish a long-term communication with other colleagues working in the same field. Upon my return to Croatia, I definitely felt more confident to continue this research and maintain long-lasting links between the research labs. ■



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