Determining the individual, community and societal response to communication impairment in Australia and China

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Summary

How we sound influences how others perceive us physically, intellectually and morally. For individuals with disordered communication (i.e., difficulties in speaking, understanding and hearing), those biases are often intensified leading to substantial social impact beyond the communication disorder itself. The nature and degree of response to a speaker is thought to be mediated by a listener’s culture. These differences are hypothesised to arise from “salient values learnt through the socialisation of his/her culture”. Inherent differences between cultures (e.g., individualism and collectivism typically linked to “Western” and “Eastern” cultures) have been proposed to contribute to cultural differences in values, perceptions and social behaviours.

The proposal

The Australia-China Joint-action Program jointly run by the Academy of the Social Sciences of Australia and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences brought two communication research labs together from Australia and China. The Voice Research Laboratory (VRL) in the Division of Hearing and Speech Sciences at The University of Hong Kong was established in 2000 to support communication science in the Asia Pacific region. Under the direction of Prof Edwin Yiu and A/Prof Estella Ma, the VRL has now positioned itself as an international leader in the field, fostering work in voice pathology and cross cultural research. The Speech Neuroscience Unit (SNU) in the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences at The University of Melbourne draws on expertise from a cross-disciplinary team of neurologists, engineers and neuroscientists in Australia, Germany and Hong Kong. Through two core domains, the SNU aims to improve communication and swallowing outcomes in patients with neurodegenerative disease (atypical dementia, hereditary ataxias); and develop a
globally relevant understanding of the impact communication impairment has across the lifespan.

The aim of the ASSA funded project was to build a collaborative research environment between the two speech/voice research labs in order to develop a series of projects designed to increase our understanding of the role communication disorder plays in diverse cultures.

**Processes and outcomes**

To date the seed funding has provided for co-investigators to spend time at each respective lab. The initial visit allowed Dr Vogel to present his work in Hong Kong and for the team to establish a more focused set of goals for the project. After a return visit by A/Prof Ma to Melbourne, a series of studies that explore individual, community and societal response to communication disorder in Australia and China were initiated.

Over the past two years Dr Vogel and A/Prof have co-supervised honours students together, with one student from Hong Kong (on the project titled: The attitudes of dysphonic individuals toward others with dysphonia and their self-perception) and two students from Melbourne completing their theses on the topic. The findings were presented at the 9th Asia Pacific Conference on Speech, Language and Hearing held in Taiwan in November 2013. On a larger scale, the team recently submitted an ARC Discovery Grant entitled “How we sound influences how we are perceived: cultural differences” with the aim of extending their work beyond the individual, to the community and the broader society in Australia and China. Ultimately, by considering attitudes of the individual, community and society across two cultures, we hope to recognise and engage health and disability related cultural diversity in a way that leads to informed policy makers, clinicians and members of society interacting with communication disorder in different cultural groups.