

NEWS

Community Newsletter: A call to bring megastudy might to autism behavioral studies

BY SPECTRUM

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Twitter can feel like an echo chamber — but sometimes the reverberations amplify important calls to action. This week, **Andrew Whitehouse**, Angela Wright Bennett Professor of Autism Research at the Telethon Kids Institute and the University of Western Australia in Perth, tweeted a thread that turned up the volume on **Helen Tager-Flusberg**'s retweet of a December paper in *Nature*, "**Megastudies improve the impact of applied behavioral science.**"

"This is what the **field of ASD behavioral interventions** could really use now!" Tager-Flusberg, professor of anatomy, neurobiology, pediatrics and psychology at Boston University, commented.

This is what the field of ASD behavioral interventions could really use now!
pic.twitter.com/RaOiE66spV

— Helen Tager-Flusberg (@HelenTager) **December 16, 2021**

Megastudies, involving thousands of children and testing several interventions simultaneously, hold the power to yield "**more clinically meaningful data** (ie connected to real world clinical decisions) than 50 years of single trials," Whitehouse wrote. Yet to "swim against a scientific tide that we know won't yield the answers we're after," researchers need to "agree that the stakes are high" and "solve the perverse incentives around competition v collaboration."

I've been thinking about this tweet, and what this study could mean for the future of autism research.

I completely agree with [@HelenTager](#) that this is important. I also think it is critical to the future of autism clinical science and its institutions.

A brief 1/9 <https://t.co/2AkG4tP6t1>

— Andrew Whitehouse (@AJOWhitehouse) **February 11, 2022**

“If the field is calling for interven. science reform, funding will follow,” he wrote. “Right now, the field isn’t calling for it - to the detriment of clinical impact.”

A flurry of tweets this week and last featured new findings **about using prenatal ultrasound** to predict autism.

Routine **#prenatal #ultrasound** in the second trimester can identify early signs of **#Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)**, a new study by Prof. Idan Menashe, Prof. Reli Herskovitz, and [@RegevOhad](#), published at [@Brain1878](#) <https://t.co/IUZS0K4IVy> pic.twitter.com/slCp0bkuvN

— Faculty of Health Sciences-BGU (@fohsbgu) **February 15, 2022**

The study, led by **Idan Menashe**, assistant professor of public health at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Israel, found ultrasonography fetal anomalies in 29.3 percent of the children they assessed who were later diagnosed with autism, compared with 15.9 percent of the children’s typically developing siblings and only 9.6 percent of typically developing children.

“I think the results from this study are not surprising,” **Christa Lese Martin**, chief scientific officer at Geisinger and professor and director of the Autism and Developmental Medicine Institute, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, told *Spectrum* in an email.

“It’s well known that congenital anomalies (such as observed on the ultrasound) co-occur in patients with autism and other brain disorders,” Martin wrote. “The fact that this study only focused on the autism phenotype as a developmental disorder and didn’t include other brain disorders (like intellectual disability, epilepsy, ...) is overstating the association with just autism and not the broader developmental disorder spectrum.”

Ben-Gurion University hosted the 4th National Autism Research Conference in Israel last week.

The 4th National Autism Research Conference was held this week with BGU's Azrieli National Centre for Autism and Neurodevelopment Research sponsorship. Innovative research presented at the conference included meaningful army service, music and autism, tech in autism, and more. pic.twitter.com/WJSY9LdNRv

— Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (@bengurionu) **February 16, 2022**

“Prepping for my **first in-person conference** in 2 yrs.,” tweeted **Judah Koller**, assistant professor of clinical child/school psychology and special education at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Israel. “The Israel autism research scene isn’t good at twitter but I’ll do my best to represent.”

Prepping for my first in-person conference in 2 yrs. The Israel autism research scene isn't good at twitter but I'll do my best to represent. 3 cnfrnce days coming up: (1) Community Day; (2) Science Day; (3) Roundtables discussions. **#autismisrael**
<https://t.co/uJwrYvFdvI>

— Judah Koller (@jbkoller2) **February 13, 2022**

A **highlight of Science Day** at the three-day meeting was a keynote lecture from **Diana Robins**, director and professor at the AJ Drexel Autism Institute in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on early screening, Koller reported.

Day 2 of Israel Mtng for Autism Research: Science Day! Highlights thus far. Diana Robins with great keynote re: early screening, highlighting the difficulty of relevant EBP in the community. Breakout session on early dvlpmnt, with super cool findings re: 1/3

— Judah Koller (@jbkoller2) **February 16, 2022**

And the last day of the meeting featured **roundtables that raised “Difficult questions** re: embedding standardized data collexn processes in public sector + focus on fostering a true nat'l community of researchers working collaboratively,” Koller wrote. “No clear answers but lots of potential.”

Day 3, Israel Mtng for Autism Research- Roundtables: Difficult questions re: embedding standardized data collexn processes in public sector + focus on fostering a true nat'l community of researchers working collaboratively. No clear answers but lots of potential.
#autismisrael

— Judah Koller (@jbkoller2) **February 17, 2022**

The International Society for Autism Research (INSAR) and others retweeted *Spectrum's* **new profile** of **Petrus de Vries**, Sue Struengmann Professor of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at the University of Cape Town in Cape Town, South Africa, which talks about his efforts to build a robust autism research community in Africa. De Vries is also a nominee for INSAR president-elect.

Petrus de Vries, current nominee for INSAR President-Elect, and his work at the Centre for Autism Research in Africa, is featured in a **@spectrum** profile. Read here:
<https://t.co/tkLBcMk53C>

— INSAR (@AutismINSAR) **February 16, 2022**

Anne Roux, a research scientist at Drexel University, tweeted about the **launch of the Policy Impact Project**, an effort to “connect autism research and policy to improve service systems.” The initiative hopes to solicit input from “researchers who want to translate findings and from policymakers who want to use research in their process.”

Our website is live! Aiming to connect **#autism** research and policy to improve service systems. And we want to hear from you. **<https://t.co/0yEYwcRQHm>**

— Anne Roux, MPH (@annemroux) **February 16, 2022**

That's it for this week's Community Newsletter! If you have any suggestions for interesting social posts you saw in the autism research sphere, feel free to send an email to news@spectrumnews.org.

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