

NEWS

Community Newsletter: COVID-19 and early-career researchers, Black in Neuro, talking ‘brain genes’

BY CHELSEY B. COOMBS

28 MARCH 2021

Hello, and welcome to the Community Newsletter! I’m your host, **Chelsey B. Coombs**, *Spectrum*’s engagement editor.

Up first this week is a thread from **Clare Harrop**, assistant professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, about her new study in *Autism Research*, “**A lost generation? The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on early career ASD researchers.**”

A few months ago **@AHalladayASF** floated the idea to myself, **@KCarpenterNbio** and the Twitter-less Vanessa Bal about writing an article about the impact of COVID-19 on ASD ECRs.

It is now out! 1/<https://t.co/kjXORk3Hmx>

— Clare Harrop (@ClareHarropPhD) **March 24, 2021**

Harrop and her colleagues surveyed 150 early-career autism researchers last year about how COVID-19 had impacted their work, productivity, training and mental health. All but one said their research was negatively affected by the pandemic, and 85 percent said their productivity had decreased. More than a third of the respondents said that their worsening mental health had negatively affected their ability to do research.

Another 30 percent said they had changed their research direction away from autism. That “puts the autism field at risk for losing talent that has already received a high level of specialized training,” Harrop and her colleagues note. “Such a loss could leave a gap in researchers dedicated to autism research in the next decade, further limiting future scientific discovery in our field.”

Flexibility and understanding, as well as targeted funding, childcare support and tenure clock extensions, could help keep autism researchers in the field after such a tumultuous year, they suggest.

We are pretty provocative in our suggestions - especially as 2 of us are non-TT junior faculty. But we are happy to cause some good trouble. Suggestions include making sure any COVID related policies do not exacerbate gender inequities in academia, support for childcare. 3/

— Clare Harrop (@ClareHarropPhD) **March 24, 2021**

....Bridge funding for ECRs, specific mentorship around COVID related pauses, and a paradigm shift in the way we work. We know there is light at the end of the tunnel, but the fact that a huge number of ASD ECRs were considering leaving the field should be a wake up call. 4/

— Clare Harrop (@ClareHarropPhD) **March 24, 2021**

Team member **Kimberly Carpenter**, assistant professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, wrote, “I hope that we are able to make some positive change as a result of this.”

I couldn't say it better. I hope that we are able to make some positive change as a result of this. Truly was a joy to work with **@ClareHarropPhD**, **@AHalladayASF**, and Vanessa Bal on this! Thanks for letting me be part of this dream team, ladies!!

<https://t.co/qWXA8FugeU>

— Kimberly Carpenter (@KCarpenterNbio) **March 24, 2021**

Jessie Greenlee, a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, said that the results “hit really close to home.”

As an ASD ECR myself this hit really close to home ????? Hoping it starts some conversations and we can provide all ECRs the support and resources they need!
<https://t.co/70i5cqt16g>

— Jessie Greenlee, Ph.D. (@Dr_jlgreenlee) **March 24, 2021**

Paul Whiteley, director of Education and Services for People with Autism (ESPA) Research in the United Kingdom, wrote that he was “more inclined to worry about the effect of COVID-19 on those with autism and their families.”

A lost generation? The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on early career ASD [autism] researchers <https://t.co/D7VrfDJzH9> I can see the reasons for this article but I'm be more inclined to worry about the effect of COVID-19 on those with autism and their families...

— Paul Whiteley ????? (@PaulWhiteleyPhD) **March 24, 2021**

Hannah Belcher, a postdoctoral researcher at King's College London in the U.K., disagreed with Whiteley, saying that “exploring one particular cohort doesn't take away the importance of another's experiences,” and that “as an autistic postdoc I'm really excited by the relevancy of this paper to me anyway, kind of covers something unique that we don't look at really.”

I believe several studies have now looked at that too, exploring one particular cohort doesn't take away the importance of another's experiences

— Dr Hannah Belcher (@Aspertypical) **March 25, 2021**

Also as an autistic postdoc I'm really excited by the relevancy of this paper to me anyway, kind of covers something unique that we don't look at really

— Dr Hannah Belcher (@Aspertycal) **March 25, 2021**

Our second set of highlighted social posts this week focuses on a commentary called “**Black In Neuro, Beyond One Week**” in the *Journal of Neuroscience*. The piece was written by six leaders of the online Black In Neuro community: **De-Shaine Murray, Lietsel Richardson, Rackeb Tesfaye, Danielle Nadin, Clíona Kelly** and **Paige Greenwood**.

Incredibly proud/honored to have been one of the authors in this publication. If you would like to learn more about why **@BlackInNeuro** is here to stay & what you can do to assist us, give it a read ?????

Black In Neuro, Beyond One Week <https://t.co/KEwdoOuEqQ>

— Lietsel R. ????? (@motherofneurons) **March 19, 2021**

Black In Neuro is a grassroots group that aims to “celebrate Black excellence in neuroscience-related fields.” The authors spoke about the #BlackInNeuroWeek campaign that took place on social media from 27 July to 2 August 2020, which they say “brought visibility to Black scientists in neuroscience-related fields and celebrated their often-overlooked contributions.” The campaign net the **Black In Neuro** Twitter account 3.4 million impressions.

The paper puts forth five calls to action, which **Thiago Arzua**, a graduate student at the Medical College of Wisconsin in Milwaukee and co-founder and board member of Black In Neuro, summarized in a tweet.

Absolutely incredible work by our **@BlackInNeuro** fam

Here's the breakdown of the call to action:

- 1) Invest time, money, and resources.
- 2) Be mentors.
- 3) Compensate.
- 4) Revise your curricula.
- 5) Be accountable.

and of course, read the full article below <https://t.co/INo9MXccOh>

— Thiago Arzua (@thiagoarzua) **March 17, 2021**

Luke Ramage-Healey, associate professor of psychological and brain sciences at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, wrote that it was “a powerful piece.”

A powerful piece in [@SfNtweets](#) today. Commentary by [@BlackInNeuro](#) leadership. Check it out! <https://t.co/ah1CLt51j6>

Thank you for your words and leadership: [@shaineNeuro](#), [@ClionaKelly01](#), [@motherofneurons](#), [@pentopaige_](#), [@RackebT](#), and [@DanielleSipsTea](#)

— Luke Ramage-Healey (@HealeyLab) **March 17, 2021**

Christine Liu — an artist, graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley and a co-founder and board member of Black In Neuro — connected the struggles of Black neuroscientists to those of neuroscientists of other identities.

“It is painfully sad for me to recognize how the work of anti-racism falls on Black trainees who are already severely marginalized, and how the only people who checked in on me today in the wake of anti-Asian terrorism were Black women trainees,” Liu wrote.

It is painfully sad for me to recognize how the work of anti-racism falls on Black trainees who are already severely marginalized, and how the only people who checked in on me today in the wake of anti-Asian terrorism were Black women trainees.

— christine liu ???? (@christineluart) **March 17, 2021**

A rising tide lifts all boats. Anti-racism requires solidarity between all identities.

Today for me, for all of us, please read, share, and learn from this piece by some of the leaders of **@BlackInNeuro** <https://t.co/LYV9rNtBuD>

— christine liu ???? (@christineluart) **March 17, 2021**

Jasmine Kwasa, a graduate student at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, tweeted, “I continue to admire (and stan) this incredible team of scientific thinkers and anti-racist activists, the **#BlackInNeuro** leadership team.”

I continue to admire (and stan) this incredible team of scientific thinkers and anti-racist activists, the **#BlackInNeuro** leadership team. Read this piece. They (and we) are the future!! <https://t.co/9XX9Ui5dII>

— ? jasmine aka Shuri's labmate (@JasmineKwasa) **March 25, 2021**

Finally, I wanted to highlight a *Spectrum* Viewpoint that sparked a lot of conversation on social media: “**There are no autism-specific genes, just brain genes,**” by **David Ledbetter** and **Scott Myers**.

“We recommend that researchers and clinicians avoid referring to genes as ‘autism genes.’ Based on current evidence, this is not a meaningful concept,” they write. “And continuing to separate genes related to neurodevelopmental conditions into categories based on individual clinical diagnoses even though the genes and diagnoses overlap substantially has the potential to be misleading in both clinical care and research.”

Kevin Mitchell, associate professor in developmental neurobiology and genetics at Trinity College Dublin in Ireland, tweeted that the above excerpt was “the take-home message” of the article.

The take-home message from [@dhledbetter](#) and [@ScottMyers20](#) on "autism genes":
pic.twitter.com/t6eGcxSWvq

— Kevin Mitchell (@WiringTheBrain) **March 23, 2021**

Kimberly Aldinger, senior scientist at Seattle Children's Research Institute in Washington, said the piece was an "important perspective on 'autism genes.'"

Important perspective on "autism genes". <https://t.co/WqrED97PgZ>

— Dr. Kimberly Aldinger (@kaaldinger) **March 24, 2021**

Liam Satchell, lecturer in psychology at the University of Winchester in the U.K., commented that "if there is to be biomarker work, it should be symptom-led rather than diagnosis led."

Great piece worth a read.

Like a lot of biomarker research for psychopathology, you're dealing with labels for highly heterogenous presentations (esp. in ASD).

If there is to be biomarker work, it should be symptom-led rather than diagnosis led.

<https://t.co/5XWeOQ1uLM>

— Liam Satchell (@lpsatchell) **March 23, 2021**

Lauren Hough Williams, director of the Program for Inclusion and Neurodiversity Education at New York University in New York City, expanded on the article's message, saying, "Imagine the possibilities if we shift the focus to how do we improve educational & employment opportunities for **#ActuallyAutistic** communities."

So much focus on whether there is an “autism gene.” Imagine the possibilities if we shift the focus to how do we improve educational & employment opportunities for **#ActuallyAutistic** communities. **#AskTheExperts** <https://t.co/k6pWfB8Yo3>

— Lauren Hough Williams (@SquarePegLabs) **March 24, 2021**

That’s it for this week’s edition of *Spectrum’s* Community Newsletter. If you have any suggestions for interesting social posts you saw in the autism research sphere this week, feel free to send an email to me at chelsey@spectrumnews.org. See you next week!