

NEWS

Community Newsletter: INSAR 2021 edition

BY CHELSEY B. COOMBS

9 MAY 2021

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

This week, *Spectrum* headed to the annual meeting of the International Society for Autism Research (INSAR) — virtually, of course — to find out what's new in the field. You can read all of our coverage on *Spectrum*.

We also kept an eye out for what you were saying online about INSAR. Here's a sampling.

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!function(){"use strict";window.addEventListener("message",(function(a){if(void 0!==a.data["datawrapper-height"])for(var e in a.data["datawrapper-height"]){var t=document.getElementById("datawrapper-chart-"+e)||document.querySelector("iframe[src*='"+e+"'"]);t&&(t.style.height=a.data["datawrapper-height"][e]+"px"))}})}();
```

INSAR's keynote addresses were a highlight of the conference.

Petrus J de Vries, professor of child and adolescent psychiatry at the University of Cape Town in South Africa, gave a talk called "What kind of research should we do and where should we do it?" that focused on what his research team has learned working with the tuberous sclerosis complex community, as well as autism research in low- and middle-income countries (LMIC).

What a phenomenal opening keynote **#INSAR2021** from Petrus de Vries. I was not expecting to feel inspired but the focus on community priorities & participatory research gives me hope for the future of **#Autism** research. Lots to learn from **#TSC #TAND** research community @ **AutismINSAR** <https://t.co/FgHkAMmBVx>

— The Autistic Doctor (@AutisticDoctor) **May 4, 2021**

I really enjoyed Petrus de Vries' keynote at **#INSAR2021**

My take home was the move from research on communities, to in communities, to with communities. And the need for more research in LMIC (where the majority of autistic individuals live). The pie chart was eye opening.

— Clare Harrop (@ClareHarropPhD) **May 4, 2021**

I think Dr. de Vries answering to the question "how can we navigate academia and publishing where studies get rejected because they come from LMIC?" was one of the best parts of his keynote. Resource and capacity building in LMIC is central **#INSAR2021**

— Dr Teresa Del Bianco (@teresadbnc) **May 4, 2021**

A keynote address from **Tony Charman**, chair of clinical child psychology at King's College London in the United Kingdom, looked at early autism diagnosis and intervention, and what researchers can learn from the past.

Fantastic **#INSAR2021** keynote from **@TonyASDorAFC**. Really important points about ensuring as many kids as possible get support, early interventions best if focused on supporting general developmental abilities, & necessity always of reflecting & changing ideas when needed!

— Dr Lizzie Shephard (@lizzieshephard) **May 5, 2021**

Great **#INSAR2021** talk by **@TonyASDorAFC** arguing for focus on wider NDD conditions rather than **#autism** only, esp in young kids when specific diagnoses may not be reliable. We started this approach pragmatically in **#Ethiopia**, interesting this applies to high-income contexts too

— Dr Rosa Hoekstra (@rosa_hoekstra) **May 5, 2021**

Listening to Tony Charman Keynote **#INSAR2021** and reflecting on how fortunate I was to work with him as a fledgling RA & struck by his point re 'negotiating' diagn. with parents over time as presentation changes- ASC not always present early and trajectories difficult to predict.

— Jess(ica) Graham (@jessig_psych) **May 6, 2021**

Many tweeted about the COVID-required virtual format of the conference.

Although virtual conferences can expand access to people far from the conference's location, **Gail Alvares**, a postdoctoral researcher at Telethon Kids Institute in Nedlands, Australia, wrote that this can actually be a drawback for people in far-off time zones.

It's a little frustrating as a registered attendee to not be able to participate in any of the live sessions, or any of the resulting conversations, until days later. Virtual conferences can be great, but more consideration needed for engaging those in varied timezones **#INSAR2021**

— Gail Alvares (@gailalvares) **May 5, 2021**

Brianne Tomaszewski, assistant professor of psychiatry at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, tweeted that the virtual format reminded her of a quote from a recent commentary in *Autism Research*, "**A lost generation? The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on early career ASD researchers.**"

Shout out during **#INSAR2021** to **@ClareHarropPhD** commentary on pandemic impact. Feeling this during another virtual conference: "despite exhausting yourself and trying your hardest? you are falling short in both the spheres of work and home is magnified"
<https://t.co/mgIUtAIZc6>

— Brianne Tomaszewski (@britomaszewski) **May 4, 2021**

Many people also tweeted about INSAR's pre-recorded presentation format.

One pseudonymous attendee said the format is great for allowing panelists to answer questions as they come up during the presentation.

Pre-recorded science presentations so the presenter can answer questions in the comments live is my new favorite thing **#MLLIA #INSAR2021**

— starpants (@mtn_sky_mtn) **May 6, 2021**

But some of the panelists, like Monique Botha, research fellow at the University of Stirling in Scotland, were a little uneasy watching themselves give a recorded talk.

I am excited for our panel on stigma later at **#INSAR2021** but god I miss just delivering a talk because the idea of watching myself give one makes me feel a little bit queasy ????

— Monique Botha #TransRights (@DrMBotha) **May 6, 2021**

Although we can't go into the Twitter discussion of all the research presented at INSAR, we did want to highlight one thread from **Noah Sasson**, associate professor of behavioral and brain sciences at the University of Texas at Dallas. His tweets about research from **Kilee DeBrabander**, a graduate student in Sasson's lab, got a lot of engagement.

Very proud of [@kmdebrabander](#) for her [#INSAR2021](#) poster “Autistic Adults Accurately Detect Social Disinterest in their Conversation Partners when Non-Autistic Adults Do Not”. A????about our findings, which pretty clearly don’t align with a social cognitive deficit model of autism! pic.twitter.com/a3wnjQ4ewl

— Noah Sasson (@Noahsasson) **May 4, 2021**

The study focused on metaperception: a person’s beliefs about how others perceive them. Autistic and non-autistic participants had a five-minute introductory conversation with another person. They were then asked to rate the quality of the conversation, as well as how their partner would rate it and whether they thought the person would want to talk to them again in the future.

Both autistic and non-autistic participants had difficulty predicting how their conversation partners viewed them.

However, only autistic adults accurately predicted when their partners wanted to interact with them again and when they didn’t.

It turns out, people are really bad at this! All participants, not just autistic ones, had difficulty predicting how others viewed them.

However, only autistic adults accurately predicted when their partners wanted to interact with them again and when they didn’t.

— Noah Sasson (@Noahsasson) **May 4, 2021**

Sasson suggested that the results are a reminder of the weaknesses of the ‘deficit model,’ which posits that autism traits are problematic and that autistic people do not understand or want to relate to others. This framing has been **criticized by neurodiversity advocates** for pathologizing autism rather than recognizing the condition as a different way of thinking. The findings, he wrote, may even turn that model on its head and suggest that autism researchers need to examine how their own biases color their interpretations of study results.

But such an interpretation would reframe more accurate performance among autistic adults as a failure. A more impartial reading would be that autistic adults demonstrated intact

social cognition in this context and it was non-autistic people who showed a social cognitive deficit.

— Noah Sasson (@Noahsasson) **May 4, 2021**

In a way, these findings are a litmus test of sorts for a type of autism research. How you interpret a difference in autism can depend on the priors, expectations, and beliefs you bring into the study. We as autism researchers should question these whenever we can.
/end

— Noah Sasson (@Noahsasson) **May 4, 2021**

Damian Milton, a lecturer in developmental and intellectual disabilities at the University of Kent in the U.K., wondered about framing these results in the context of the **double-empathy problem**. The double-empathy problem describes the difficulty two people with different life experiences have in empathizing with each other. For example, many non-autistic people blame the problems they have communicating with an autistic person on the autistic person, but research has shown that the difficulties actually come from both people.

Very interesting research. I'd thought about these methods in connection to autistic social lives / double empathy problem before, so really glad to see this work being done.
#doubleempathy @Noahsasson @cjcrompton @SueReviews take a look (nice clear poster too). **#INSAR2021** <https://t.co/BhzAN5zGgh>

— Damian Milton (@milton_damian) **May 5, 2021**

Debra Karhson, a postdoctoral researcher at Stanford University in California and president of the Stanford Black Postdoc Association, tweeted, "I love how there is more and more research coming out that is starting to complicate the clinical view of **#autism**."

Very cool! I love how there is more and more research coming out that is starting to complicate the clinical view of **#autism**, especially when it comes to social and cognitive functioning! **#INSAR2021** <https://t.co/KLMJI6bcbL>

— the tiniest doomwook (@drdebah) **May 4, 2021**

The traditional social-cognitive view of autism has been that autistic people are worse at communicating than non-autistic people. But as **Kristen Bottema-Beutel** succinctly summed up, this study is another piece of evidence that autistic people may be better at some aspects of communication than neurotypical people.

Another nail in the coffin of the social cognitive account ?? <https://t.co/l84gIKiK1y>

— Dr. Kristen Bottema-Beutel (@KristenBott) **May 4, 2021**

That's it for this week's *Spectrum* Community Newsletter! We'll get back to our regularly scheduled programming next week. In the meantime, if you have any suggestions for interesting social posts you saw in the autism research sphere, feel free to send an email to me at chelsey@spectrumnews.org. See you next week!