

NEWS

Community Newsletter: When results don't replicate, autistic study consultants

BY CHELSEY B. COOMBS

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

You don't often see a researcher promoting results that walk back their **original research**. But **Victoria Southgate**, professor of psychology at the University of Copenhagen in Denmark, did just that this week on Twitter, and people took notice.

This cross-lab replication failure of our own work is now published
<https://t.co/5p8JS8CXY7> <https://t.co/ZWDM00z1Zx>

— Victoria Southgate????????????? (@vhsouthgate) **August 25, 2021**

In 2007, Southgate and her colleagues used eye tracking on 20 toddlers as they took a 'false belief' test, concluding that the children can infer that an adult doesn't know something they know.

Over the years, a **number of studies** have looked at how autistic and non-autistic participants of all ages fare on such tests. And the results have lent support to the idea that autistic people have more difficulty with **theory of mind**, or the ability to understand other people's mental states.

But Southgate's original results didn't hold up when she and her team repeated their study with 2.5 times the sample size.

"We conclude that an important piece of evidence that has to date supported arguments for the

existence of this competence can no longer serve that function,” the authors write in their 2021 paper. They add that the results show that only this particular experiment used in conjunction with this age group of participants does not work, and that other false belief understanding studies may still hold up.

Uta Frith, emeritus professor of cognitive development at University College London in the United Kingdom, called it a “sad but ultimately uplifting story.”

A sad but ultimately uplifting story. Heroic work by [@vhsouthgate](#) [@dora_kampis](#) [@MikolajHernik](#) <https://t.co/YgAOcAivSP>

— Uta Frith (@utafrith) **August 25, 2021**

“What a great team of model scientists replicating their own work and acknowledging failed replications,” **Candace Lapan**, assistant professor of psychology at Wingate University in North Carolina, replied.

Great work by [@vhsouthgate](#) and colleagues. What a great team of model scientists replicating their own work and acknowledging failed replications. <https://t.co/SCKZqn7CiJ>

— Dr. Candace Lapan (She/Her) (@CandaceLapan) **August 25, 2021**

Our next thread comes from Connor Tom Keating, a doctoral student at the University of Birmingham in the U.K., who wrote an opinion piece for *Frontiers in Psychology* about the **benefits of participatory research** with autistic people as consultants and why involving them should go beyond tokenism.

Exciting announcement!??An article I wrote as part of a special edition on addressing community priorities in autism research has now been published! Check it out here: <https://t.co/FZY3CR14Is> ?????1/4

— Connor Keating (@ConnorTKeating) **August 24, 2021**

In the commentary, Keating writes that some researchers may involve autistic people, but only to “tick a box,” such as a participatory research requirement from a journal or funder.

“At best, these tokenistic approaches may fail to deliver meaningful results for the community, and at worst, they are insulting and damage the relationship between autistic people and academics, thus leading to non-participation in research,” Keating writes.

Keating also provided concrete examples of what involving autistic people in studies in a consultation role looks like from the generation of a research question to the dissemination of the results. He uses his own work with the Birmingham Psychology Autism Research Team Consultancy Committee as an example. In a study on language preferences in autistic people, that committee not only helped clarify a questionnaire, but also pointed out that how researchers refer to non-autistic people, whether it be ‘neurotypical,’ ‘typical’ or ‘non-autistic,’ is just as important as how they refer to autistic people.

“Input at this stage not only improved the clarity of participant-facing documents, but also elucidated a priority for the community (to establish how we should refer to non-autistic people) and broadened the potential impact of our paper,” he writes.

Sophie Sowden, a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Birmingham, tweeted that it was a “really great piece.”

Check out this really great piece by **@ConnorTKeating** discussing one very important community priority in **#autismresearch - #participatory** practices and why and how we can implement them in the best, most inclusive way <https://t.co/8e8PSH9RTg>

— Dr Sophie Sowden (@Sophie_Sowden) **August 24, 2021**

Sarah O’Brien, a research and policy officer at the U.K.’s national autism research charity Autistica, wrote that it was “great to see an ever increasing groundswell of support for participatory research.”

Great to see an ever increasing groundswell of support for participatory research and importantly centring autistic people in research that has often been about us but not with us.

<https://t.co/888j5o0L0k>

— sarah o'brien (@Sarahmarieob) **August 24, 2021**

Saara Reiman, the founder of Kaiao, an organization that offers consultancy and training services on autism and sensory sensitivities, tweeted that it was a “must read for **#autism** professionals.”

Some VERY useful research. Must read for **#autism** professionals. <https://t.co/iFK45CHGIZ>

— Saara Reiman (@ReimanSaara) **August 24, 2021**

If you missed our 31 August **webinar with Laurent Mottron**, professor of psychiatry at the University of Montreal in Canada, who discussed “**a radical change** in our autism research strategy,” you can now watch it on our site.

And don't forget to register for our 28 September webinar, featuring **Jeremy Veenstra-VanderWeele**, professor of psychiatry at Columbia University, who will speak about goals for developing new drugs for autism — and the barriers researchers may encounter.

That's it for this week's *Spectrum* 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 me at chelsey@spectrumnews.org. See you next week!

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