

Q&A

# Beyond the Bench: A conversation with Waganesh Zeleke

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Before **Waganesh Zeleke** moved to the United States in 2008 to earn her doctorate in mental health counseling, she worked as a psychologist in her home country of Ethiopia, sometimes with autistic children. Her experience supporting autistic people and their families in two countries led her to wonder about how cultural views can shape autistic people's lives, and the lives of those around them.

This curiosity motivates her research as associate professor of counseling, psychology and special education at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania — work that in May won her the 2020 **Cultural Diversity Research Award** from the International Society for Autism Research.

*Spectrum* talked with Zeleke about the questions that drive her research, the journals that fill her home and how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected both her personal and professional life.

***Spectrum:* What questions drive your research?**

**Waganesh Zeleke:** I focus on how systems, context and culture shape our understanding of mental health and wellness in general. When it comes to autism, my agenda explores the diagnosis and prognosis of autism in Africa, with some exploration in Ethiopia and in Zimbabwe.

I embrace the concept of **neurodiversity** and mindfulness in autism treatment and intervention. My research team and I are interested in exploring how the conceptual understanding of autism as a neurodiversity issue shapes the lives of an individual on the spectrum and their family.

Seeing the spectrum as a diversity issue really shapes the way we treat and create opportunities for individuals on the spectrum or families. This approach recognizes that genetic or other kinds of biological variations are intrinsic to people's identities, and it respects a person's sense of self and personhood, as is the case with any other form of diversity.

Instead of focusing on what causes autism, our research focuses on how the cultural understanding of autism — either in the scientific view or in the general community — shapes an individual's growth and also shapes the practitioner's view of the spectrum.

I am interested in setting up an approach or a framework that considers the person as a whole rather than focusing on their diagnosis or treating their traits. Part of my work also explores disparities in healthcare in Africa and here in the U.S. — for example, how immigrant children with autism and their families access and utilize healthcare services, and how evidence-based interventions work in different cultures and contexts.

**S: Is there anyone whose work you particularly admire?**

**WZ:** I am a big fan of **Judy Singer** from Australia. She is on the spectrum, and she came up with the term 'neurodiversity.' I think that's very interesting and brings more ideas and perspective into the scientific world.

**S: Do you have a mentor?**

**WZ:** Yes, I do. My lifetime mentor — I call her that because I've been working with her since 2005 — is this enthusiastic, outstanding woman, **Lynne Koester**. She's an emerita professor at the University of Montana. I am also a big beneficiary of the mentorship of **Tammy Hughes, John Sommers-Flanagan** and **Rita Sommers-Flanagan**. Of course, when it comes to life mentorship, my husband is a go-to person for cross-checking about my existence.

**S: What does your day-to-day schedule look like?**

**WZ:** I start my day with a gratitude practice and a jog for about three miles with my 12-year-old son, if the weather allows. Even though we are social-distancing, we have managed to maintain that habit. Then we come back and I feed him and his 8-year-old sister, and I help them get ready for virtual school. Once they start, I read and sometimes write for 30 to 40 minutes. I reserve the first two hours of my morning for me and my family. I don't check email. I don't see a device until I start my workday.

Once I start working, I spend 30 minutes checking email, and then the rest of the day varies. Sometimes my day is filled with meetings and consultations. On other days I teach a couple of classes or do therapy. Otherwise, I am typically working on my research. Some days it could be writing for publication, some days it could be analyzing data. In a typical year, I usually teach five courses, so now I spend a lot of time on Zoom. I teach online. I do consultation online. I also do telemedicine therapy for clients and do research online.

**S: When and where are you most productive?**

**WZ:** I am most productive when I'm sitting in my office. Now that I work at home, I have to have my own designated area. I really connect with the physical environment that I am in, so I'm very intentional just to have a bright room and a quiet place. Some days I may have classical music in the background, but most of the time, if I'm analyzing data, I prefer quiet.

**S: Do you have a favorite research conference to attend?**

**WZ:** The International Society for Autism Research (INSAR) is my favorite one, for many reasons. My background is in mental health counseling, and mostly I attend the American Counseling Association conferences. But because I work with autistic people and do research on autism and mental health, I value the opportunity that INSAR gives me to meet many people from different backgrounds and academic fields, such as psychology and public health. My research agenda really involves an understanding of the whole person, and I feel like INSAR brings the whole field into one room.

**S: Did you participate **online** this year?**

**WZ:** Yes, but it's not quite the same. I love the in-person experience. I love meeting people from different countries coming together. Just within a day you can make lifelong friends. Hearing the stories from different places is really amazing.

**S: What are you reading right now?**

**WZ:** "Good Morning, I Love You," by **Shauna Shapiro**. It's a science-based book that cultivates compassion and mindfulness. It's the story of how the author came to be more mindful and awakened. I love her work.

**S: How do you get your news?**

**WZ:** Twitter is my go-to source for professional news. It's quick and I get updated information about my colleagues. But otherwise I'm not big in terms of consuming social media. I don't have a TV, but I keep myself updated about the news back home from online news and my friends who live there. I listen to NPR and watch BBC news online maybe once a week, too.

**S: Do you subscribe to any journals or magazines in print?**

**WZ:** I'm a member of the American Mental Health Counselors Association, the American Counseling Association and the American Psychological Association. I have a subscription to the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*. I love the print version of that journal. I also have *Counseling Today* and the American Psychological Association journals, and *Child Development*.

It's flooded my house actually. It's a big journal. When you have it, it fills space, so now I am moving more into the online subscriptions.

**S: What do you eat or drink while working?**

**WZ:** Well, I am from Ethiopia, so you would expect coffee is always on my table. I am also a big green tea drinker. You will always see almonds and dark chocolate on my table. I love homemade food, so I cook most of the time and prefer plant-based foods.

**S: How many unread emails are in your inbox right now?**

**WZ:** I would say, don't ask ladies about their age and their emails.