Letter from the INSAR Student & Trainee Committee Chair, Marika Coffman

I still remember my first INSAR (which was called IMFAR at the time), when I was a research assistant. It was in San Diego, and I knew hardly anyone. I attended the Student & Trainee Social, where I stood in line for free food (!), nervous to start up a conversation with the other students and trainees. When one of the Student & Trainee Committee (STC) members reached out to welcome me to the event, I felt immediately more comfortable. Not long after, I joined the STC myself! In my time serving on the STC, I have been continually impressed both by the dedication of the STC members to the student and trainee members, as well as humbled by the good work our student and trainee community is doing. Putting on STC events at the Annual Meeting (e.g., Meet the Experts, Preconference, Social) requires equal parts teamwork and communication between the STC members, support and enthusiasm from the INSAR Board, dedication to mentoring the next generation of autism researchers from our senior and early career faculty volunteers, and engagement from the students and trainees who attend these events. We are fortunate to have this combination! Thanks to feedback from INSAR members and support from the Board, the STC has created several new events, including the INSAR Institute (formerly Summer Institute). We are looking to create new networking opportunities for jobs, internships, and postdocs. Please stop by our booth at the Annual Meeting to provide feedback, enter a raffle, and share your interests and ideas about how we can better serve you!

Preconference Workshop

The focus on this year’s preconference workshop is grantsmanship! The goal is to provide the opportunity to deepen knowledge of funding agencies and to receive personalized discussion from leaders in the field of autism research specific to grant writing. This will be accomplished through a two-part workshop including a discussion panel and a small group session.

Look for us in Montreal!
Throughout the conference
Visit us at the Student and Trainee Booth!

Wednesday, May 1
12pm-3pm | Student and Trainee (Preconference) Workshop*

Thursday, May 2
12.30pm-1.30pm | Meet the Experts Luncheon*
This event gives students and trainees the opportunity to spend the lunch hour with leaders in the autism research community.
7pm-10pm | INSAR Student Member Social
@ L’Auberge Saint-Gabriel
Attend the free social during the INSAR Annual Meeting to connect with other early career researchers who are interested in autism research!

Friday, May 3
7.15am-8.45am | Special Interest Groups (SIGs)
12.30pm-1.30pm | Meet the Experts Luncheon*

Saturday, May 4
7.15am-8.45am | Special Interest Groups (SIGs)
*pre-registration required
Check out the Student Booth for more details.

INSAR Institute 2019
Understanding heterogeneity in autism research and clinical practice: A multidisciplinary approach

This 6-week webinar series will focus on broadening our understanding of co-occurring psychiatric, medical, and developmental conditions of autism through empirical research. Additionally, its implications for both inclusive clinical practice, and for providing tailored support towards individual needs will be addressed. Recent INSAR SIGs revealed increasing interest in the heterogeneity of autism. Therefore, each session will comprise a presentation that addresses heterogeneity through one of the diverse topics including psychiatric, biomedical, developmental, and gender identity issues in autism, followed by Q&A.
Bonnie Lau is a postdoc research associate at the University of Washington.

Q: Briefly, tell us about your research
A: Many Individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) experience auditory processing differences including hyper- or hyposensitivity to sounds, aversions or unusual interests in sounds, and difficulty listening when it’s noisy. However, their etiology is not well understood. To investigate, we combined behavioral, clinical and neurophysiological measures to create individual Auditory Processing Profiles. For each subject, we measured how well they understood speech when it was noisy (i.e., when two other speakers are talking at the same time). We also obtained four physiological measures of how well sound is being encoded and transmitted in the ear and the brain using otoacoustic emissions and electroencephalography. We hypothesize that this multi-measure assay of auditory function, in contrast to previous measures of a single neurophysiological response, will reveal replicable patterns of neurophysiological differences across individuals with ASD. Our preliminary analyses suggest that the neurophysiological differences that underlie difficulty listening in noise may look different across individuals.

Q: If you had to describe yourself in three words, it would be...
A: Inquisitive, energetic, creative

Q: What are your future career goals/plans?
A: I hope to direct my own laboratory that investigates early brain development and the mechanisms that support auditory processing and language acquisition in individuals with and without ASD.

Q: What is a challenge you’ve faced in your research, and how have you overcome that?
A: One of the biggest challenges we faced was the length of data acquisition. We spent a lot of time piloting the neurophysiological measures and working on the data analysis approaches in order to obtain sufficient characterization along the entire auditory pathway (inner ear, brainstem, cortex). It was a balance between obtaining enough measures to test our hypothesis while keeping the protocol within a reasonable number of visits and enjoyable to participate in for our families.

Q: What is a challenge you’ve faced in your research, and how have you overcome that?
A: This question makes me think about my own personal experience. Many individuals around the world, including myself, function in multiple cultural-linguistic environments everyday. At home, I speak Cantonese and live in a Chinese household. At work and in the community however, I switch to English and American culture. Many individuals with ASD and their families also do this everyday. I believe recognizing my own cultural-linguistic environment and the need for cultural-linguistic intelligence is important in the field.

Want to see your work here?
Are you conducting research right now that you would like to share with the INSAR community? Check your email for the submission opportunity for our next newsletter! This is your chance to let us know about the exciting work you are contributing to the autism research community.

Want to see your lab here?
Do you want to inform the INSAR community about your lab? Do you want to attract (inter)national colleagues to your lab? Is your lab conducting research right now that you would like to share with the INSAR community? Check your email for the submission opportunity for our next newsletter!

Research Corner

Autism research is being conducted all over the world and it is important to know who is doing what, where and how. That’s why in each new newsletter edition, we will spotlight a research group, lab, or consortium. We hope that this information will lead to more (inter)national collaborations, research stays, sharing of methods and data, and more internationalization of PhD and postdoc positions. This aligns with INSAR’s strategic initiative to make the research field more diverse and global.

This edition’s pick:

Centre for Applied Autism Research at University of Bath (UK) (CAAR) researches the social-cognitive challenges faced by autistic people, to facilitate full and active involvement within society. This requires the active participation of the autistic and broader autism communities, including ‘the autistic researcher.’ Our ongoing research aims to fully include the community within research, and to facilitate the translation of theory into practical applications.

Some research highlights:

- **Transition services:** Every year, CAAR hosts a 3 day summer camp known as the University of Bath Autism Summer School (UBASS) for autistic students aged 16+ who are seeking to apply and transition to postsecondary education, led by Professor Mark Broshnan, Dr Ailsa Russell, Dr Chris Ashwin, and Miss Jiedi Lei (PhD Student). Students provided very positive feedback in our evaluation of the first 5 years of UBASS. We also host a 2 day Bath Employment Spring School for Autism (BESSA) in conjunction with JP Morgan for autistic students currently studying at or recently graduated from postsecondary education, to help improve their job seeking skills.

- **Service adaptation:** Dr. Katie Maras and Dr. Jade Norris are currently investigating how interviews in important applied contexts (including the Criminal Justice System, employment interviews, and health and social care consultations) should be adapted to support autistic people. Such contexts most often use open-ended questioning which many autistic people find difficult to answer, compared to using specific questions. Our work focuses on adapting interviews and helping service providers adapt their communication with autistic service users.

- **Clinical Trial:** A feasibility study comprising a randomised controlled trial of an adapted cognitive behavioural intervention for depression in adults (the Autism Depression Trial: ADEPT) led by Dr. Ailsa Russell at CAAR was successfully completed in May 2018. The intervention was well-received by participants and therapists alike.

Sparked your interest? Sure, it did! There might be a future PhD opening, postdoc position, or collaboration in it for you, so be sure to check their website!