Meet-the-Experts went Virtual!

For over the past 10 years, the Student and Trainee Committee (STC) has hosted an event at the INSAR Annual Meeting called the Meet-the-Experts (MTE) Luncheon. During this event, research assistants, graduate students, and postdoctoral fellows have the opportunity to meet informally with an autism research expert. Because the in-person Annual Meeting was canceled this year due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the STC sought a way to provide an online forum for networking opportunities for INSAR students and trainees. We were delighted to receive the support of the INSAR Board to host and pilot a virtual series of MTE events on July 28th, 29th, and 30th.

Sarah Cassidy

Dr. Sarah Cassidy is a Professor at Nottingham University. Her research program aims to better assess, understand, and prevent mental health problems, suicidal thoughts, and suicidal behaviors in autistic adults. Dr. Cassidy believes in working in partnership with those affected by this research, including the autism community and those bereaved by suicide. She is Principal Investigator on the Mental Health in Autism project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the first Psychological Autopsy study in autism funded by the National Institute for Health Research Collaboration for Leadership in Applied Health Research and Care (NIHR-CLAHRC) and Autistica. Dr. Cassidy is a Deputy Editor of the journal Autism in Adulthood.

Dr. Cassidy has found that many experts are very willing to meet and, in fact, are excited to be able to support more junior researchers.

During her vMTE session, Dr. Sarah Cassidy shared advice with students and trainees about networking, policy and community engagement, and avoiding burnout.

On Networking:

Dr. Sarah Cassidy encouraged attendees to begin networking early in their careers. She described the value of reaching out to experts in the field and other researchers with similar interests. This could simply be emailing before a conference to ask for a meeting during a coffee break. She acknowledged that this is often intimidating to budding researchers. In her experience, however, Dr. Cassidy has found that many experts are very willing to meet and, in fact, are excited to be able to support a more junior researcher. Relatedly, Dr. Cassidy was asked specifically about how to branch into an uncommon or relatively understudied area of research. Her suggestions included attending conferences on related topics (e.g., a conference focused on suicidality) and forming panels or groups of people with similar interests. For example, she described how the Suicidality SIG at INSAR helped to bring together people with similar interests. Dr. Cassidy shared that she has formed many collaborations through these experiences that led to identification of clear research priorities in her specific area.

The STC would like to gratefully acknowledge the contributions of the five experts who enthusiastically participated in this novel event, including: Drs. Sarah Cassidy, Peter Mundy, Helen Tager-Flusberg, Laura Anthony, and Christina Nicholaidis. Each session was moderated by STC members Alan Gerber, Alana McVey, Hillary Schiltz, Jiedi Lei, Marika Coffman, Michal Cook, and Nicholas Fears. Experts answered attendees’ questions skillfully and shared their career experiences, research from their laboratories, and advice on how to build a successful research career. We are thrilled to share some of our favorite pieces of advice and stories from these experts with our Newsletter’s readers. We hope that this Special Issue provides some inspiration and guidance to the future generation of autism researchers around the globe.

-Hillary Schiltz, M.S.
MTE Working Group Leader, INSAR STC Secretary
On Engaging with Policy and Community:
Dr. Cassidy highlighted the value of conducting research and publishing with an eye towards policy change. Policy is one avenue where research findings can make large meaningful changes in the world. As such, she encouraged students and trainees to learn about the connections between research and policy. Although this process can be lengthy, there are concrete steps, such as meeting with policy makers, that can make a difference. In addition to engaging with policy makers, Dr. Cassidy also described the role of engaging with the community in her research. In particular, connecting with an organization such as the James Lind Alliance or an autistic steering committee can help to inform research questions based on what the community thinks is most relevant and important.

On Avoiding Burnout:
Dr. Cassidy spoke directly about ways to avoid burnout. She first and foremost recommended finding a topic that truly inspires you! She shared her own research journey and illustrated that it is feasible and acceptable to change your specific research focus after earning a PhD. Additionally, she emphasized the importance of balancing work and personal life. One way to work towards this balance could be limiting work to 8-hour days and avoiding working on weekends. Dr. Cassidy encouraged attendees to be very careful and mindful about how they are spending their time.

**Dr. Cassidy shared her own research journey and illustrated that it is feasible and acceptable to change your specific research focus after earning a PhD.**

On Research and Clinical Practice:

With regard to clinical and research domains, Dr. Mundy identified that bidirectional communication is key. He said, "researchers and clinicians can inform one another's ideas." For example, clinicians can identify the emotional, cognitive, and biobehavioral underpinnings for what a researcher may be seeing in the data (e.g., joint attention as measured by eye tracking in the classroom). This bidirectional communication also helps to keep the research relevant—what do the changes in behavior mean? This is often more consequential than the measurements themselves. For those who are looking to balance clinical work and research, Dr. Mundy acknowledged there can be discomfort in the tension between the two. He encouraged students and trainees to look to those who have done this well over their careers. He said that he himself stopped doing clinical work years ago to focus on his program of research. Dr. Mundy highlighted that clinical work can provide insights into new avenues of research, and conversely, that research skills can inform clinical practice. As an example, assessment report writing may strengthen skills in presenting information logically to convey an accessible message.
Dr. Helen Tager-Flusberg is a Professor and the Director of the Center for Autism Research Excellence at Boston University. She holds a Ph.D. in Experimental Psychology from Harvard University. She is a Professor in the Department of Psychological & Brain Sciences, Boston University and Professor, Department of Anatomy & Neurobiology and Pediatrics, Boston University School of Medicine. She has long-standing interests in language and social-cognitive development in a number of different populations, especially those with autism, Williams syndrome, and developmental language disorders. More recently, her research has explored the connections between brain structure and function and cognitive/behavioral impairments in people with these disorders at various ages, from infancy through young adulthood. Her work is supported by grants from the National Institutes of Health and private foundations. She has edited several books, published many articles and chapters, and served on the editorial boards of a number of professional journals. She served as the President for the International Society for Autism Research from 2011 to 2013.

During her vMTE session, Dr. Tager-Flusberg answered questions and shared advice about four topics, namely 1) networking, 2) time management and collaboration, 3) publications and research dissemination, and 4) staying curious as a researcher.

**On Networking:**
Dr. Tager-Flusberg shared some of her own experiences of starting out as a graduate student in a relatively under-researched area. She found it valuable to meet with peers and experts at conferences in order to establish a research network and develop friendships. Her advice for students is to be unafraid of reaching out to others with shared research interest in their field. To network efficiently, Dr. Tager-Flusberg encouraged students and trainees to make a list of researchers whom they would like to meet and seek them out using a variety of methods such as arranging a virtual individual meeting or joint lab meeting, perhaps at a conference or through an advisor.

**On Time Management:**
Dr. Tager-Flusberg discussed the importance of delineating one’s priority clearly and always ensuring that there is designated time for one’s primary projects before taking on additional work. Relatedly, when considering collaborations, she recommended that students first liaise and discuss with their potential collaborators to outline their shared research interest clearly, followed by discussing with one’s advisor to carefully think through why this collaboration is meaningful. It is always a good idea to clearly define roles and have a concrete plan and timeline in writing before embarking on any projects, and remember that it is possible to leave a collaboration if it fails to meet with your expectations.

**On Publications and Research Dissemination:**
Dr. Tager-Flusberg expressed her dislike of the phrase “to publish or perish,” and, although quantity can be a metric of one’s productivity, it is the quality of those publications that truly matters. For those who might experience writer’s block, she asked students and trainees to carefully consider the primary message they would like to convey to their audience before sitting down to write. She believes that writing offers the opportunity for the researcher to interpret and understand whether the study truly answered the research question(s) one had in mind. She described research as an active learning process that involves reading, thinking, reflecting, and revising. One of her recommendations for those who are looking for a new writing project (especially during the pandemic) is to start a systematic review. Not only is this type of paper an excellent way to critically examine and learn about a new area of research, but it can also often lead to highly cited papers that are hugely beneficial to others in the field.

**Dr. Tager-Flusberg concluded that to be a good student and researcher, one must love to read and write!**

She emphasized that it is important to maintain a curious mindset, read widely, and stay aware of new methods, technologies, and emerging fields to inspire new project ideas.

---

**Laura Anthony**

Dr. Laura Gutermuth Anthony is an Associate Professor at the University of Colorado School of Medicine, Children’s Hospital Colorado. Dr. Anthony’s work involves Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR), intervention development, and comparative effectiveness research for children on the autism spectrum. She is one of the co-authors of Unstuck and On Target! which addresses executive functioning (cognitive and behavioral flexibility) challenges for students with autism or ADHD in the classroom.

Dr. Anthony recommended that students and trainees try to build a “little force field” around themselves to cope with failures of grants, papers, and job interviews, as failures are inevitable.
On Flexibility and Resilience:
Dr. Laura Anthony highlighted the need to be open-minded and flexible as an aspiring researcher. She described her own career journey and the non-linear path that many researchers take. Additionally, she encouraged attendees to be mindful that even though most people talk about their success, all have failures. Dr. Anthony recommended that students and trainees try to build a “little force field” around themselves to cope with failures of grants, papers, and job interviews, as failures are inevitable. Flexibility and resilience are also important when considering funding. Students and trainees may want to consider non-National Institutes of Health (NIH) grants and atypical sources of funding, as all funding is funding! Dr. Anthony also emphasized that a very important piece of preparing for a career in research is the match between student/trainee and mentor. A good working relationship can influence many aspects of research, including the writing process and a student/trainee’s career path.

On Stakeholder Engagement:
Dr. Anthony spoke about the need to engage families and stakeholders in research. She mentioned that this is especially important in intervention research. In particular, researchers should select outcomes that are important to all stakeholders including children, parents, and teachers. She also mentioned that providing newsletters or pictographs for families and autistic participants that describe data in simple terms or making short videos describing content can help build a relationship and trust within the community. For longitudinal projects, it can be nice to provide graphs to demonstrate progress to the families, participants and other stakeholders. Dr. Anthony emphasized the importance of compensating stakeholders for their involvement in the research process and sharing their expertise. This could be in the form of monetary compensation for families or offering to deliver talks at schools. Overall, she described the need to maneuver research from an intellectual pursuit to something meaningful for people on the spectrum, their families, and communities.

Christina Nicolaidis
Christina Nicolaidis, MD, MPH is an internal medicine physician and a Professor and Senior Scholar in Social Determinants of Health at Portland State University, with a secondary appointment in the Department of Medicine at Oregon Health & Science University, and is the Co-Founder and Co-Director of the Academic Autism Spectrum Partnership in Research and Education (AASPIRE), and the Founding Editor-in-Chief of Autism in Adulthood. She has worked on many disparate-sounding topics and with many different communities over her career, but the strongest thread is using participatory research approaches to collaboratively improve the health or wellbeing of marginalized populations. Her autism-related work has focused on healthcare, employment, autistic burnout, and pregnancy, as well as the authentic inclusion of autistic adults in research and scholarship.

On Community Based Participatory Research:
Dr. Nicolaidis has an extensive history of working with her colleague, Dr. Dora Raymaker, to develop a Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) program. Importantly, she highlighted that having relevant stakeholders on the research team is critical to ensure research aims meet the needs of the participants involved. Dr. Nicolaidis emphasized that this approach goes beyond conducting focus groups, as the aim is to foster an equal partnership between community and academic partners. She encouraged researchers to consider the needs of their project. That is, not every project requires a CBPR approach; other approaches to consider are patient-stakeholder engagement strategies and advisory models. Ultimately she described the importance of elevating community voices in order to drive research activity.

CBPR as an approach that can be used with various methods:
In discussing her experience building these partnerships, Dr. Nicolaidis emphasized that CBPR is an approach that can be used with almost any type of methods. She has used it in qualitative and quantitative or mixed-methods research. It’s even possible to use it for basic science research. The point is to authentically engage community members as part of the research team. Dr. Nicolaidis recommended that students and trainees ensure their research questions align with the method they have chosen (e.g., making sure one is not using quantitative methods to answer qualitative questions).

On Building Community Partnerships:
Dr. Nicolaidis shared her experience co-founding and co-directing the Academic Autism Spectrum Partnership in Research and Education (AASPIRE). She encouraged early researchers interested in building this kind of partnership to first identify their community of interest. To this end, considering whether the community should be local (e.g., “What is the experience of being autistic in Portland?”) or more broad (e.g., “What is the experience of being autistic?”) is important. Similar to CBPR, it is critical to have a diversity of lived experience on the research team, including equitable representation of race, ethnicity, intellectual ability, and verbal skills amongst other identities and traits. She emphasized that good scientific research needs to involve stakeholders, and she challenges early researchers to strive for equal partnerships and true power-sharing between community members and researchers.