



SESSION II

Autism and Intersectionality: Autism and Sexuality

Mark Stokes, Ph.D. with Kirstin Greaves-Lord, Ph.D.

July 1st, 2021 // 6:00 pm EDT

Course Materials

The purpose of these materials is to help provide an introduction to the INSAR Institute session on understanding the intersectionality between autism and sexuality. The materials were designed to prepare students and trainees who are unfamiliar with this research with the general background to get the most educational benefit from the session. Toward this objective, we have prepared the following: (1) learning objectives for this session, (2) key terms and concepts, (3) a selection of recommended resources. These materials are considered supplemental to the presentation.

In collaboration with Drs. Stokes and Greaves-Lord, these materials were developed by **Dr. Alana McVey**, who is a Postdoctoral research fellow at the University of British Columbia, Canada and also the STC Chair (amcvey@psych.ubc.ca); **Dr. Nick Fears**, who is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Michigan, USA (nfears@umich.edu); and **Dr. Charlotte Pretzsch**, who is a Postdoctoral Research Associate at King's College London, UK (charlotte.pretzsch@kcl.ac.uk). Feel free to contact us with questions/comments. Register for

this course and other sessions in this series at: <https://www.autism-insar.org/event/institute2021>.

Learning Objectives

The INSAR Institute for Autism Research was established in direct response to requests from students and trainees for multidisciplinary training opportunities. The INSAR Institute team is also working to engage stakeholders. The INSAR Institute priorities are to provide a (1) freely available, (2) multidisciplinary training platform for young scientists and others from various backgrounds that (3) allows for international participation. The overarching goal of the INSAR Institute is to expose junior scientists to topics they are not currently engaged in, with the hope that basic scientists and clinical scientists may learn from each other to ultimately advance the understanding of autism.

The current session, Autism and Intersectionality: Autism and Sexuality, is led by Drs. Stokes and Greaves-Lord, and a team of trainees who worked in tandem to prepare this handout and the web presentation. *At the conclusion of this session, participants will:*

1. **Understand** the intersectionality between autism and sexuality
2. **Identify** the challenges arising from this overlapping and intersecting minority status
3. **Discuss** intersectionality, subsequent challenges, and potential ways forward

Key Terms

Forensically: Belonging to, used in, or suitable to courts of the administration of justice or to public discussion and debate. Also relating to or dealing with the application of scientific knowledge to legal problems. (Merriam-Webster)

Gender Identity: Gender identity is not inherently defined by one's physical anatomy. It is an internal and psychological identification of oneself as a woman, a man, both, in between, or neither. Furthermore, gender identity may change over time or from day-to-day (i.e., gender fluidity). (For more information, see the references to Prince et al., 2008 and George et al., 2017 below.)

Heterogeneity in Autism Spectrum Disorder: Autism spectrum disorder has been associated with many environmental and genetic risk factors (i.e., more than 500 genetic risk factors). Similarly, there is a wide range of clinical phenotypes.

Intellectual Disability: A neurodevelopmental disorder defined by limitations in cognitive abilities that affect both intellectual and adaptive functioning. Ability to learn, problem solve, and reason are all involved in intellectual functioning, which is generally quantified using an intelligence quotient (IQ) test. Intellectual disability is defined as an IQ ≤ 70 and reduced adaptive functioning. Adaptive functioning is typically measured using standardized questionnaires or interviews completed by caregivers and/or teachers. Skills that are necessary

for day-to-day functioning, such as communication and practical skills, make up the adaptive functioning domain. At least one-third of autistic people have co-occurring intellectual disability.

Intersectionality: “The term intersectionality refers to the way in which categories such as sex, gender, disability, and ethnicity do not stand alone but rather interact (and intersect) in complex ways that affect individual experience, notably to increase marginalization and discrimination” (see the reference to Cascio et al., 2021 below). In this event, we focus on the intersectionality between autism and sexuality, and how they interact and influence individual experience.

Mental Health Risks: In the context of this event, this refers to the risk of developing conditions associated with poor mental health. These may include, but are not limited to, depression and anxiety. The presenters are particularly drawing attention to the fact that the intersection between autism and gender and/or sexual orientation minority status can give rise to mental health risks.

Repetitive Behaviors: Repetitive behaviors occur over and over or are stereotyped. They can involve motor movements, use of objects, or speech.

Sexuality: The definition of “sexuality” may differ between people and change across time. Broadly, the term refers to sexual behavior, as well as self-image, emotions, values, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, relationships, and more. An individual’s view of their sexuality may change in response to interactions, experiences, and (in)formal education. For more information, see the reference to Koller et al., 2000 below.

Sexual Orientation: Sexual orientation refers to a pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attraction. The last can include attraction to the same gender (gay or lesbian), a gender different than yours (heterosexual), both men and women (bisexual), all genders (pansexual), or neither (asexual) (<https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/health-topics/abj9152>). Detailed data regarding the sexual orientation from a large sample of autistic people is lacking, but researchers agree that there is greater variation of sexual orientation (and gender identity) among autistic people, compared to non-autistic people. (For more information, see the reference to Dewinter et al., 2017 below.)

Social Communication: Social communication is a broad term that describes verbal and nonverbal behaviors used to interact with others. Examples include, but are not limited to, speech, prosody, gestures, and facial expressions. These behaviors can be used to initiate or respond to joint attention, to share emotion with others, or to signal when one person wants the attention of another person, and many other uses. Difficulties with social communication are a diagnostic characteristic of autism.

Transgender: People whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. (<https://www.glaad.org/transgender/transfaq>).

Recommended Readings & Resources

- Cascio, M. A., Weiss, J. A., & Racine, E. (2021). Making Autism Research Inclusive by Attending to Intersectionality: A Review of the Research Ethics Literature. *Review Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 8(1), 22–36. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40489-020-00204-z>
- Dekker, L. P., van der Vegt, E. J., van der Ende, J., Tick, N., Louwerse, A., Maras, A., Verhulst, F. C., & Greaves-Lord, K. (2017). Psychosexual functioning of cognitively-able adolescents with autism spectrum disorder compared to typically developing peers: The development and testing of the teen transition inventory-a self-and parent report questionnaire on psychosexual functioning. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 47(6), 1716–1738. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-017-3071-y>
- Dewinter, J., De Graaf, H., & Begeer, S. (2017). Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Romantic Relationships in Adolescents and Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-017-3199-9>
- George, R., & Stokes, M. A. (2018). Gender identity and sexual orientation in autism spectrum disorder. *Autism*, 22(8), 970–982. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361317714587>
- Pecora, L. A., Hancock, G. I., Hooley, M., Demmer, D. H., Attwood, T., Mesibov, G. B., & Stokes, M. A. (2020). Gender identity, sexual orientation and adverse sexual experiences in autistic females. *Molecular Autism*, 11(1), 57. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13229-020-00363-0>
- Prince, V. (2005). Sex vs. Gender. *International Journal of Transgenderism*, 8(4), 29–32. https://doi.org/10.1300/J485v08n04_05
- Sala, G., Hooley, M., & Stokes, M. A. (2020). Romantic Intimacy in Autism: A Qualitative Analysis. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 50(11), 4133–4147. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-020-04377-8>
- Sala, G., Pecora, L., Hooley, M., & Stokes, M. A. (2020). As Diverse as the Spectrum Itself: Trends in Sexuality, Gender and Autism. *Current Developmental Disorders Reports*, 7(2), 59–68. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40474-020-00190-1>
- Visser, K., Greaves-Lord, K., Tick, N. T., Verhulst, F. C., Maras, A., & van der Vegt, E. J. (2017). A randomized controlled trial to examine the effects of the Tackling Teenage psychosexual training program for adolescents with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 58(7), 840–850. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.12709>