

## **Recognising autism in females: exploring via blogs the role of other mental health conditions in females' autism diagnoses.**

This project will examine the role of mental health problems in the diagnostic journeys of females with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), through drawing on experiences documented in public blogs and taking a qualitative approach. From previous research, we know that other mental health problems are common alongside ASD (Howlin & Moss, 2012) and that females are on average diagnosed later than males (Bargiela et al., 2016). Studies have also shown that females with ASD are more likely to show internalising behaviours and emotional problems than males with ASD, and due to this difference in behavioural presentation, ASD is likely to be missed unless there are other problems diagnosed (Duvekot et al., 2017). Other mental health problems could expedite clinical attention to previously unrecognised ASD symptoms, or they could delay true recognition of ASD and lead to misdiagnosis. Through content analysis we will document the experiences of females with ASD, as reported in their blogs, to further understand the facilitative or suppressive role other mental health conditions play in the timely diagnosis of females with ASD.

The objectives of this study are to conduct a content analysis of blogs by females with ASD. We will document the age at which they were diagnosed with ASD, at what point in their ASD diagnosis journey they received a mental health problem diagnosis, and whether they found the mental health diagnosis a misdiagnosis or a helpful one. The project speaks to the university's health and wellbeing research theme, as the results of this project could lead to a deeper understanding of traits of females with ASD and in turn to earlier and more efficient diagnosis of the condition. I intend to present the results of this project in an academic poster at the Developmental Psychology British Psychological Society conference in September 2021.

This project has been chosen as it represents the intersection between two current topics in ASD research: ASD in females and the comorbidity of mental health problems with ASD. Additionally, the topic resonates with my personal experience of women I know who were originally diagnosed with a mental health problem and then a year or two later received a diagnosis of ASD.

In order to ensure the success of the project, ethical approval would be gained in advance of the research period. The timescale proposed is using the first three weeks to search for and read blogs, before coding the most relevant 15-20 using NVivo, the fourth and fifth week would be used to conduct content analyses and a summary report would be written in the final week.

During the second summer of the scholarship I would hope to participate in the leadership in action charity expedition or placement. I believe this would build my leadership skills greatly, and provide the opportunity to develop a different skill set to those acquired during the research period in the first summer.