

NEWS

# Community newsletter: COVID-19 anniversary, social responsibility of genetics research, autism research feedback

BY CHELSEY B. COOMBS

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Hello, and welcome to the community newsletter! I'm your host, **Chelsey B. Coombs**, *Spectrum's* engagement editor.

As our readers no doubt know, this week marked the one-year anniversary of when the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. Many people have taken to Twitter to talk about what they were doing last March.

**Clare Harrop**, assistant professor of allied health sciences at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, reminisced about the annual meeting for the International Society for Autism Research (INSAR), which was scheduled to take place last May in Seattle, Washington.

Remember a year ago when we were wondering if INSAR 2020 would go ahead. How young and naïve we all were....

— Clare Harrop (@ClareHarropPhD) **March 10, 2021**

In early March, however, the city was **one of the first** COVID-19 hotspots. Eventually, the conference **moved online**, and this year it will be **fully virtual** again.

Many academics had to shift gears from in-person research to remote data analysis and paper writing. **Joshua Grubbs**, assistant professor in clinical psychology at Bowling Green State University in Ohio, tweeted about how that has affected publishing.

Am I the only academic that feels like their 2020 productivity was pretty reasonable because of so much “in the pipeline” stuff that actually came out, but the real toll of the pandemic is going to come over these next two years?

— josh grubbs (@JoshuaGrubbsPhD) **March 10, 2021**

The inability to collect data this past year has had a major effect on early-career researchers, replied **Lauren Weinstock**, associate professor of psychiatry and human behavior at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island.

This has been a point of discussion here, too. I’m especially thinking of the early career folks who may have lost the opportunity to collect pilot data for next step, larger projects - and of course, the impact on P&T in a couple of years.

— Dr. Lauren Weinstock (@LMWeinstockPhD) **March 10, 2021**

Some institutions are taking that into consideration when looking at research output, though, noted **Corey Peltier**, assistant professor of educational psychology at the University of Oklahoma.

I know this solution won’t fix the current issue, but our dept just switched to a moving 3-year average and I feel like this makes so much more sense for evaluating research output

— Corey Peltier (@CoreyJPeltier) **March 10, 2021**

**Kristin Anders**, assistant professor of human development and family science at Kansas State

University, said her university is “actually accounting for that in our tenure packets.”

100%!! Luckily our university is actually accounting for that in our tenure packets and released a statement of support acknowledging that they expect some faculty/researchers to have challenges related to productivity down the road.  
(We have an amazing faculty senate President)

— Dr. Kristin M. Anders (@KAnders\_PhD) **March 10, 2021**

Next up, we’re highlighting a thread on a *Nature Genetics* World View piece called “**Genes do not operate in a vacuum, and neither should our research**,” by **Daphne Martschenko**, a research fellow at the Stanford Center for Biomedical Ethics in California, and **Markia Smith**, a graduate research assistant at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

It has been the greatest pleasure to write this piece with **@MarkiaASmith** now out in **@NatureGenet**: "Genes do not operate in a vacuum, and neither should our research" **????<https://t.co/ELTYHHQE8a>**

— Daphne Martschenko, PhD (@daphmarts) **March 8, 2021**

A PERFECT start to International Women's day! This piece was special to us. I hope this starts a much needed convo **@BlackInGenetics <https://t.co/dANRS1eaqK>**

— issa PhD candidate (@MarkiaASmith) **March 8, 2021**

“Given the collective popular tendency to view genetics as separate from the environment, we as researchers in genetics and genomics need to address the social implications of our work as we conduct studies and communicate our findings,” the authors write.

Researchers across disciplines commented on Twitter, including autism researcher **Jeff Craig**,

professor of epigenetics and cell biology at Deakin University in Victoria, Australia.

This is SUCH an important article. As geneticists, we must embrace the other factors that shape people's health, especially social inequities <https://t.co/VzPvrLQEX5>

— Jeff Craig (@DrChromo) **March 9, 2021**

**Petrea Cahir**, a research coordinator at the Murdoch Children's Research Institute in Australia, wrote, "It is every researcher, institute & journal editor's responsibility to conduct & promote socially responsible research."

It is every researcher, institute & journal editor's responsibility to conduct & promote socially responsible research & dismantle "the notion that people of European descent are the standard, and everything else is a deviation." <https://t.co/2vm4Wt5N1U>

— Petrea Cahir (@petrea\_cahir) **March 10, 2021**

The paper is "a critical wake-up call," tweeted **Catherine Bliss**, associate professor of sociology at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey.

A critical wake-up call for anybody working in genetics and social science...????  
[@daphmarts https://t.co/MKnOXEzyv9](https://t.co/MKnOXEzyv9)

— Catherine Bliss (@catherine\_bliss) **March 9, 2021**

Our final Twitter thread this week comes from **Emily Paige Ballou**, co-editor of the book "**Sincerely, Your Autistic Child**" and an editor at the Autistic Women and Nonbinary Network. Ballou offered some suggestions for autism researchers about the surveys they use in their studies.

-I am so tired of having to retake the AQ as the whole first part of your survey.

It's sexist, it was designed to affirm outdated and sexist stereotypes, its assumptions about empathy have been countered by newer & better research... 2/

— Emily Paige Ballou (@epballou) **March 6, 2021**

Ballou commented on the Autism Spectrum Quotient (AQ), a self-report measure of autism traits. “I am so tired of having to retake the AQ as the whole first part of your survey,” she wrote. “It's sexist, it was designed to affirm **outdated and sexist stereotypes**, its assumptions about empathy have been countered by newer & better research, it's long, and easy to game, and quite frankly, I've already been dx'd w/ autism. It feels like having that called into question again, and again, and again.”

*Spectrum* wrote about some of the **drawbacks of self-report measures** in a 2018 feature.

**Sue Fletcher-Watson**, professor of developmental psychology and director of the Salvesen Mindroom Research Centre at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, replied with a suggestion to create an alternative to the AQ, developed by autistic people. Individual responses might be securely shared across research teams so that participants in multiple studies wouldn't have to answer the same questions over and over.

Very helpful thread.

One thing I would love to do is co-create a new alternative to the AQ which would be:

1. Generated by autistic people
2. Set up so that a person could complete it once and then choose to share a secure copy of their scores with any new research team <https://t.co/Vwv7wOkevW>

— Sue Fletcher-Watson (@SueReviews) **March 6, 2021**

**Elizabeth Shephard**, assistant professor of psychology at the University of Nottingham in the United Kingdom, thanked Ballou for “pointing out the things that are not right in research in such a gentle and understandable way.”

Really important points here. Thank you for sharing your experiences [@epballou](#) and for pointing out the things that are not right in research in such a gentle and understandable way. <https://t.co/N4MBQ2cQ54>

— Dr Lizzie Shephard (@lizzieshephard) **March 6, 2021**

**Sarah O'Brien**, research and policy officer at the U.K. autism research charity Autistica, said that Ballou's suggestions could also be applied to disability studies more broadly.

Incredibly useful thread (containing some thoughts I've long held but struggled to express).

Although some directly relate to autism others can apply to disability studies (across approaches) more broadly. <https://t.co/mLdzCjvLm>

— sarah o'brien (@Sarahmarieob) **March 6, 2021**

That's it for this week's edition of *Spectrum's* community newsletter. If you have any suggestions for interesting social posts you saw in the autism research sphere this week, feel free to send an email to me at [chelsey@spectrumnews.org](mailto:chelsey@spectrumnews.org). See you next week!