



INTERVIEW SUR LE SPECTRE

NOÉMIE CUSSON, a neuropsychology doctoral student at **Université du Québec à Montréal**

Interviewed by **JANIE DEGRÉ-PELLETIER**.



The many faces of autism research.

The profile of a future autistic researcher.

Biography

Noémie completed a bachelor's degree (Honours) in cognitive neuroscience at Université de Montréal, under the supervision of Dr. Laurent Mottron (M.D., Ph.D.). She was then accepted in the research stream of the neuropsychology doctoral program at Université du Québec à Montréal, which she is currently completing under the supervision of Drs. Isabelle Soulières and Laurent Mottron. Noémie's research interests include social cognition and cognitive strengths in autism.

What does the neuropsychology doctoral program look like?

Essentially, the neuropsychology doctoral program offers three different streams focusing on : (1) clinical neuropsychology, (2), research, and (3) clinical

neuropsychology and research respectively three different profiles, that is one profile focused on clinical neuropsychology, one profile focused on research and one profile that combines both clinical neuropsychology and research. At Université du Québec à Montréal, the clinical and research streams can be completed within 4 to 5 years whereas the stream that combines both clinical and research training lasts 6 years. The training streams that have a clinical component lead to the profession of neuropsychologist (a specialization title that is recognized by the Ordre des psychologues du Québec) whereas the training streams that have a research component lead to the Ph.D. title allowing one to become a researcher and potentially a university professor. Therefore, the classes that are offered are more oriented towards either clinical neuropsychology or research. For example, there are some neuropsychological assessment and intervention classes,



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a neuropsychology
doctoral student
at Université du
Québec à Montréal

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but also research methodology and quantitative or qualitative analysis classes. Depending on the chosen stream, students also need to complete internships either in a clinical setting or in a research laboratory.

Noémie, what brought you to the autism research world?

I became interested in autism after receiving an autism diagnosis at the age of 17. I began reading on this subject (on which I knew very little!) and, having always been interested in research, decided to specialize in this field. I never regretted my choice. Indeed, I quickly realized that I really like autism research. What I like most about research is that it can lead to new discoveries and to the development of new theories, which can in turn contribute to helping other people. I particularly like the moment when, after having collected all my data, I can start data analysis and see what the data will reveal to me. Furthermore, as researchers, we never stop learning new things and one of my interests is precisely acquiring new knowledge.

As I became more familiar with the autism research world, I realized that there were not many autistic researchers in this field. Further, by reviewing the scientific literature, I sometimes had the feeling that alternative interpretations could be brought forward to explain results. Thus, I believe that it is an advantage as an autistic researcher to be able to combine, in my research projects, my explicit knowledge (acquired through my readings) and my implicit knowledge (acquired through my personal experience) about autism.

What career goals do you hope to achieve?

Getting my diagnosis literally changed my life and allowed me to understand myself better. Thus, one of my goals as a future autism researcher is to improve the understanding that the general population, professionals, and researchers have of autism and to help demystify this condition. As such, I believe that it is very important to clearly communicate my research results to the general population, and to disseminate results in lay language and make them accessible to as many people as possible. I also hope that my research projects will contribute to improving autistic people's quality of life. Finally, I wish to put forward the idea that autism is not a disease, but simply a different way of perceiving the

world around us. Thus, although autism is linked to some difficulties, it can also be associated to several strengths on which we can capitalize!

Which autism research projects are you currently working on?

For my Honour thesis, I conducted a literature review on empathy in autism and my results suggested that autistic people feel other people's emotions as much as neurotypical people (affective empathy). However, they seem to have more difficulties understanding other people's emotions (cognitive empathy). Furthermore, from my Honour's thesis research, we concluded that the method chosen to measure empathy seems to have a major impact on the studies' conclusions. Therefore, I am currently working on a meta-analysis on this subject to validate these results.

I am also involved in other projects. More specifically, I am collaborating on a project that aims to reconceptualize "restricted" interests in autism under the viewpoint of passions and to better understand the consequences that these passions have on autistic people's functioning. This project will highlight the adaptive aspects of autistic people's passions and may help them develop harmonious passions, which are linked to several positive consequences including better quality of life. I am also working on a project that looks at how clinicians diagnose adult autistic women and how they distinguish autism from other psychiatric conditions. This project's results may help clinicians less familiar with autism to better understand how autism manifests itself in adult women.

Concluding remarks

I would like to finish by saying that I am convinced that research can truly have a beneficial impact on the population that we study if it meets a need of that population. Thus, I believe that it is important to involve autistic people in all the steps of the research process, and this includes involving them in the early stages such as priority setting and methodology as early as for the choice of the subject and the methodology. Including autistic people in future research projects would add an interesting perspective as much to the development of the project as to the interpretation of the results and would lead to a better understanding of autism!