



INTERVIEW SUR LE SPECTRE

ANNE-MARIE NADER, occupational therapist, neuropsychologist and postdoctoral trainee.
Interviewed by **CAMILLE LETENDRE**.



The many faces of autism research

Over the magazine's following issues, we will be profiling members and collaborators of the Montreal Autism and Cognitive Neuroscience research group. These brief interviews will shed some light on the many researchers, professionals and students who contribute to autism research, and highlight their unique career paths, projects and commitment to the field.

Biography

Anne-Marie originally trained as an occupational therapist at the University of Montreal, and has extensive clinical experience practicing occupational therapy. For many years, she led a practice within the CISSS Monteregion-Ouest's Complex Developmental Disorders Clinic, specifically working with autistic teenagers and children. She also practiced at the Douglas Institute, in the field of youth mental health.

Anne-Marie's fascination with the brain and cognitive functioning in autistic people then led her to a doctoral

program in neuropsychology at the Université du Québec à Montréal, supervised by Isabelle Soulières, PhD, and Armando Bertone, PhD. Her doctoral thesis, which she defended this January, explored learning and categorization processes in autistic children. Anne-Marie's work revealed that autistic children do not benefit from the same type of help as non-autistic children do when learning new information. During her doctoral program, Anne-Marie welcomed two daughters. She still combines her clinical practice with research and teaching. Anne-Marie's passions include travelling and the outdoors!



Anne-Marie Nader
occupational therapist,
neuropsychologist
and postdoctoral trainee



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Anne-Marie, what drew you to autism research?

My doctoral thesis project actually came to me within the context of my clinical work as an occupational therapist. The time I spent observing how autistic children react in different situations made me want to better understand how they learn. I was finding that our tendency to simplify all information and environments as much as possible did not always seem helpful for autistic children. On the contrary, many of these children appeared to prefer being given wider access to learning material. I wanted to support learning in autistic children, while exploring strength-based ways of doing this.

What do you think are the important clinical takeaways from your work?

My thesis results suggested that autistic children are more sensitive than typical children to the way in which learning material is presented and how they receive feedback during learning. This can have an important impact on how we implement interventions. Autistic children seem to benefit from being presented with all necessary information in an organized way, and from having access to a wide range of information (for example, many items from the same category presented together). Children also seem to benefit from being able to manipulate, categorize and organize their learning material.

Therefore, it may be interesting if in certain contexts we moved away from focusing on very specific elements, and tried off the bat to demonstrate different ways of learning the concept in question (for example, different versions of the same emotion, different breeds of dogs to understand the concept of dog), and applied this to different types of learning (social, language, sensory, academic etc.). The main takeaway is that there are many ways to reach the same goal, and I think it then becomes of the utmost importance to understand how autistic children function if we want to provide them with optimal learning environments.

Which aspects of being a researcher do you enjoy most?

Research careers offer a wide range of possibilities and a variety of activities, which I enjoy. In research, we apply rigorous standards, innovation and creativity to a topic we are passionate about. I also appreciate the teamwork involved and this has always been at the center of my practice. Research allows me to work closely with other colleagues to achieve a common goal, whilst sharing in the expertise and experience of every member of the team. I also have a particular interest in clinical research, where I promote regular communication between autistic people, families, clinical practice and research. The projects I work on are always influenced by my clinical practice. What I find interesting with the autistic population is that we are moving away from focusing on weaknesses, and moving towards strengths and how these can be used as springboards to optimize functioning in different individuals.

Which autism research projects are you currently working on?

I have started a postdoctoral placement within Université de Montréal's Psychiatry Department, with the goal of bridging the gap between developmental differences in autism and their functional use. I am therefore investigating the well-being and quality of life of autistic adults living in residential services (supervisors: Dr. Roger Godbout, Ph. D. and Baudouin Forgeot D'Arc, M.D., Ph. D.). My role involves developing and implementing a research project to evaluate the impact of a novel housing model on quality of life in autistic adults, in collaboration with the Véro & Louis Foundation and the CISSS Montérégie Ouest. The idea behind this project is to use what we know about the characteristics of autism to build a living environment which corresponds to residents' needs (e.g. architecture and adapted spaces, activities corresponding to different profiles etc.). I am also working on a longitudinal project seeking to better understand the emergence of mental health problems in autistic youths. Lastly, I am working with the Côte-du-Sud School Board to develop tools for autistic children to manage their emotions and anxiety within a school context. All in all, lots to feel motivated about! 