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AUTISM AND NEURODIVERSITY RESEARCH

UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

Spring 2026 Newsletter

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EDITORIAL

Welcome to the Spring 2026 issue of the Autism@Manchester newsletter. In this issue, we cover recent events and research, as well as opportunities for you to get involved in the community.

At Autism@Manchester (A@M), we believe it is important to keep our readers up to date with developments in autism research. By sharing news, events, and opportunities, we hope to facilitate collaboration and empower autistic people and their loved ones to have a voice in the research that shapes their lives and care.

Recently, our team celebrated the career of Emma Gowen, co-founder of the BEAM Lab and A@M, at her inaugural lecture following her promotion to Professor. As Emma reflected on her early life, education, and career journey, we were reminded of the importance of security, creativity, and collaboration in supporting people to achieve their goals and reach their potential.

Continuing these themes, this issue covers the latest research and publications from across our community. We explain the recent changes to our logo, which were made to better reflect and include the diversity of the autism community. We also reflect upon the winter Café Autistique event, where researchers and community members came together to discuss recent research and issues that matter to autistic people and their families.

You will also get a chance to find out about our new research toolkit, which will take you through everything from how to read a research paper to a guide to getting involved with research yourself!

This issue also features the work of Dr Ketan Parmar, recipient of this year's George Giles Postgraduate Research Prize, whose work focusses on improving eyecare accessibility for autistic adults and the development of autism-friendly resources for eyecare providers. Finally, we advertise several autism-focused studies that you may be interested in taking part in.

We hope you enjoy this issue of the A@M newsletter and that it helps you feel connected to the autism research community. You can find more news on our website and blog: <https://www.autism.manchester.ac.uk/>

By Matthew Kasper, Autism@Manchester student intern

EXPLAINING THE CHANGE TO OUR LOGO

Some of you may have noticed a change to our logo – now with the inclusion of Neurodiversity. This is to reflect our widening research in this area and range of different neurodivergent experiences. Watch out for related activities and events on this theme...

LATEST RESEARCH ARTICLES FROM AUTISM@MANCHESTER AND COLLABORATORS

List of Publications

Bai, Y., Brillinger, M., Karlinsky, A., Poliakoff, E., Welsh, T. N., & Gowen, E. (2025). Speed-accuracy trade-offs in action perception, motor imagery, and execution of hand movements in autistic and non-autistic adults. *Scientific reports*, 15(1), 13255. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-025-97036-w>

Bai, Y., Poliakoff, E., & Gowen, E. (2025). Perception of biological motion and actions in Autism: A systematic review. *Neuroscience and biobehavioral reviews*, 178, 106343. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neubiorev.2025.106343>

Birtwell, K., Planner, C., Epton, T., Gowen, E., Corsellis, E., Botha, M., Longley, S., Khan, G., Stratton, C., & Wong, G. (2025). Optimising general practice support for autistic adults: a realist review protocol. *Systematic reviews*, 14(1), 184. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13643-025-02936-7>

Brillinger, M., Bai, Y., Karlinsky, A., Welsh, T. N., Poliakoff, E., & Gowen, E. (2025). A mixed methods exploration of motor imagery in autistic and non-autistic adults: Diverse experiences and implications for interventions. *PloS one*, 20(6), e0326542. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0326542>

Edwards, C., Love, A. M. A., Cai, R. Y., Constable, P. A., Love, D. C., Parmar, K., Gowen, E., Doherty, M., & Gibbs, V. (2026). Improving eye care access for autistic people: applying the autistic SPACE framework. *Clinical & experimental optometry*, 1–4. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164622.2025.2606937>

Edwards, C., Love, A. M. A., Cai, R. Y., Constable, P. A., Love, D. C., Parmar, K., Gowen, E., & Gibbs, V. (2025). Autism in eye care: A mixed-methods study of professional knowledge, confidence and clinical experience. *Ophthalmic & physiological optics : the journal of the British College of Ophthalmic Opticians (Optometrists)*, 45(7), 2116–2128. <https://doi.org/10.1111/opo.70029>

Edwards, C., Love, A. M., Cai, R. Y., Constable, P., Love, D. C., Parmar, K., Gowen, E., & Gibbs, V. (2026). Understanding eye care access for autistic adults and families: A convergent mixed-methods study. *Autism : the international journal of research and practice*, 30(1), 122–133. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613251371509>

Parmar, K., Porter, C., Dickinson, C., Baimbridge, P., & Gowen, E. (2025). Refractive and ocular motor status in autistic adults without learning disabilities: an exploratory study. *Clinical & experimental optometry*, 108(7), 821–829. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164622.2024.2413701>

From our colleagues at Manchester Metropolitan University:

Huysamen, M., Hatton, C., & Kourti, M. (2025) Embrace difference, challenge normativity: Towards a neuroqueer-informed ethic for supporting autistic adults' intimate lives. *Feminism in Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09593535261422510>
[doi.org]

ACHIEVEMENTS AND AWARDS

[Dr Ketan Parmar](#) is the winner of this year's George Giles Postgraduate Research Prize, awarded by the College of Optometrists.

The award recognises Ketan's research on eyecare accessibility challenges in autistic adults and the development of resources for eyecare providers to deliver autism-friendly services.

The Research Excellence Awards celebrate the outstanding achievements of talented academics and clinician scientists involved in the fields of optometry, optics, and vision science and mark the critical role researchers play in providing the evidence base that underpins optometric practice.

Ketan, who is a Lecturer in Advanced Clinical Optometric Practice, was presented with the award at the College's prestigious annual Diploma and Awards Ceremony, held at Central Hall, Westminster on 18 November.

Commenting on the award he said: "I feel privileged to have been awarded the George Giles Research Excellence Award. This prestigious recognition has confirmed the importance of my research and fuelled my drive to improve eyecare accessibility for special populations.

I've always wanted to do research which makes a difference for people, and The College of Optometrists' recognition has reassured me that I'm going in the right direction.

President of The College of Optometrists, Dr Gillian Rudduck, said:

"I'd like to extend my congratulations on behalf of the College to this year's award recipients. The continued growth and strength of our profession's knowledge and evidence base depend on optometrists who choose to pursue a career in research and innovation.

As we confront the challenges of an ageing population, the demand for more sustainable optical equipment and materials, and the increasing need to collaborate across eye care pathways, advancements in eye health are more vital than ever.



This year's awardees represent some of the most dedicated and talented members of our profession, and each should take great pride in their remarkable achievements."

[The College of Optometrists](#) is the professional body for optometry. It qualifies the profession and delivers the guidance and training to ensure optometrists provide the best possible care. For more information about The College of Optometrists Research Excellence Awards, visit The [College of Optometrists website](#).

"I would like to say a heartfelt thank you to everyone at Autism@Manchester who supported my research: providing feedback on the study designs, giving expert advice, taking part in my studies and sharing your experiences. It wouldn't have been possible without you all. This award is a recognition of the need for accessible eyecare for autistic people.

MATTHEW'S PLACEMENT EXPERIENCE IN THE BEAM LAB

Hello, my name is Matthew and I was the student intern at the Body Eye and Movement (BEAM) lab for the 2025-2026 academic year, supervised by Profs Emma Gowen and Ellen Poliakoff.

I came to BEAM hoping to learn practical research skills to support my goal of becoming a clinical psychologist. During my placement, I gained experience in a range of research activities, from using MATLAB to analyse movement data to transcribing interviews. I also supported one of my supervisors, Emma, with the screening stage of her first scoping review, reviewing around 250 papers over the course of the year. Through this work, I have developed a deeper understanding of the structure of an academic paper and can now read and evaluate research far more efficiently than before.



One of the most surprising things I learned was how much work takes place behind the scenes in research: recruiting participants, administration, managing the daily influx of emails often goes unseen, yet it is essential to the success of a project. It makes the end results that much more impressive.

Beyond developing technical skills, BEAM Lab's ethos quickly became clear to me when I began helping researcher Erin Beeston with her research toolkit, which aims to help autistic people and those with mental health conditions understand, critically evaluate, and participate in research. Before my placement, I had not realised that researchers often work to educate and engage the public as well as conduct their own studies.

Helping to run focus groups and gather feedback from members of the community showed me how important collaboration is to BEAM. Before starting my placement, I had never heard of co-production, yet it was a central part of almost every project I encountered. The autism module I was asked to evaluate was a perfect example of this, as every stage of its development was informed by autistic people, which was reflected in how thoughtful and informative the lectures were. Through these experiences, I realised that my autism was a valuable asset to the lab, and that my usual response of masking or compensating for it was not needed here.

Finally, this year has helped me to significantly develop my confidence and professionalism. Working from home and structuring my own time presented unique challenges, as I had to manage my workload independently and working from my own home made establishing work / life boundaries more important. At the same time, I learnt the importance of keeping supervisors updated and communicating early if targets felt unattainable.

The slower, steadier pace of work compared to the more intense pace of my degree allowed me to trial new strategies for managing the challenges associated with my autism and ADHD. It also gave me the space to reflect on my learning needs which ultimately led me to seek an assessment and receive a diagnosis of dyslexia.

The encouragement from Ellen and Emma, alongside an autism-friendly work environment, helped me grow in a professional setting, gradually overcoming my imposter syndrome over the year. I now feel able to enter future employment with newfound confidence and greater clarity in what I can offer.

Overall, this placement has been a formative experience that has deepened my understanding of research and significantly shaped my development, both professionally and personally.

AUTISM@MANCHESTER RESEARCH INVOLVEMENT TOOLKIT

Later this summer we will be delighted to share with you all our free, online Research Involvement Toolkit

Our aim is to get more autistic people involved in research as both public contributors supporting the design and conduct of research, and as research participants. The idea came from our work with autistic people when we developed [guidance for researchers on involving autistic people](#) as contributors highlighted concerns about accessing and understanding research.

Furthermore, we hope that the toolkit can help to address some of the health inequalities that many autistic people experience. Autistic people have higher rates of most medical conditions and face significant barriers to health services. This can be due to services not being autism-informed, trauma from prior service experiences and autistic characteristics such as sensory, motor and executive functioning differences. These health inequalities are made worse by non-inclusive health and care research; autistic people are rarely included as research participants or involved as advisors. Greater involvement of autistic people in research is essential for ensuring their needs are considered across health research.

From August 2024 to 2025, The University of Manchester Research Institute's Interdisciplinary Research Pump-Prime fund supported research into autistic health inequalities. As part of this project, lived-experience researcher, Dr Erin Beeston led on the developing the toolkit, with support from lived-experience PhD student, Elizaveta Nosova, autistic contributors, Matthew Jackson in the e-learning team who has prior experience of working with autistic young people, and our Expert by Experience Group. We built four modules based on some work begun by Prof Emma Gowen, Dr Alexandra Sturrock, Dr Kathy Leadbitter and Autism@Manchester's Co-production Officer, Jaja Choktanasiri. Ideas around what each module of the online resource should contain, and how this might be made accessible to the public users online were developed with the Expert by Experience Group.

The toolkit consists of 4 modules: (1) Understanding the Research Process (2) Taking Part in Research as a Participant (3) Understanding Research Findings (4) Getting involved in research co-production. The toolkit is designed to be dipped in and out



Illustrations featured in the toolkit like this one are by **Jaja Choktanasiri**. This one highlights the how research from one academic article (the orange paper) has influenced other researchers (who use some orange!).

of, and none of the modules need finishing to get to the next. Anyone can explore any aspect of the four modules without needing to save progress or complete anything along the way. Your browser will remember where you are up to if you close the page.

Module (1) Understanding the Research Process is aimed at anyone interested in research, it explains what the ‘research cycle’ is and different stages of research and invites users to think critically about different forms of autism research. Module (2) Taking Part in Research as a Participant explains how to become a research participant and what you might expect to happen during this process. Module (3) Understanding Research Findings looks at how research is shared, how you can check the reliability of research, and how the media has shaped views of autism – providing tools to interrogate media sources of information. (4) Getting Involved in Research Co-Production is all about how to become a research contributor, which differs from volunteering as a participant. Contributors are invited to shape research from their lived experience. Lots of the terms used by researchers and confusing acronyms are explained in a glossary we created as a part of the project.

The toolkit is very comprehensive to make research as transparent as possible; however, some people who tested the toolkit found it too long in places. As a result of this feedback, we’ve improved signposting of additional information that are entirely optional to read. The thinking behind the amount of additional information included is to provide ways to find out more about each area, for users who wish to delve deeper.

We conducted evaluation of the toolkit with autistic people from a wider range of backgrounds (as our lived-experience contributors and researchers tend to be University educated and white British). Furthermore, a group of non-autistic people explored the potential for broadening the scope of the toolkit for people with mild to moderate mental health issues; who can face similar barriers to joining research projects. This six-month period of evaluation was supported by the NIHR Three Schools Mental Health Programme PPIE grant: Improving mental health and wellbeing in underserved populations through collaborative research led by Dr Kelly Birtwell, an experienced researcher from the School of Primary Care, and supported by Dr Alice Dunning at the School of Medicine and Population Health, University of Sheffield who guided us with mental health research perspectives. Overall, we received positive feedback and found that people with mental health issues also found it useful. This suggests our autism focus resource can benefit a wider audience.

We’d like to take this opportunity to thank our funders, all our lived-experience reviewers and colleagues who’ve supported the development of this resource. We hope you find it helps you get more involved with research. You will see the link appear on our social media, in emails to our listserv and in the next newsletter.

UNIVERSALLY MANCHESTER

On 13 June Autism@Manchester joined our friends at The University of Manchester Disabled Staff Network for ‘Universally Manchester’, the annual community celebrations held across campus. At the ‘All Minds Matter’ stand we met lots of people interested in autism research and keen to find out more, sharing our work and – most importantly – lots of biscuits. Freddie Jones, PhD researcher, created sensory bags with a continual stream of kids keen for some gooey and crunchy sensory fun. This opened lots of conversations about why those with sensory needs may use fidget toys and supports. We also enjoyed discussing the Sunflower symbol and hidden disabilities with lots of young people, who went on to draw some fantastic scientists for us. Big thanks to Freddie for setting up this stall, staff and volunteers who helped us on the day, and all the wonderful people who came over to talk to us.



Photograph of a display board from our stand at Universally Manchester with children's designs of 'what does a scientist look like?'

CAFÉ AUTISTIQUE

On 3 December we held a Café **Autistique** event at the Contact Theatre with talks from Niamh Farrell and Busra Besdere, PhD students here at The University of Manchester. If you missed the live event, you can find slides, audio and video recordings here: [Café Autistique | University of Manchester](#). Talks last around 15 minutes at these events, allowing plenty of time for questions from the audience (please note, questions aren't recorded). All are welcome to these events, but we especially encourage autistic people to join us. You can watch a short reel made by Aahana Singh on our [Instagram](#) page to get an idea of how these events work.

Niamh Farrell discussed her findings from interviews with autistic transgender individuals, who reflected on barriers they face day to day. This included the experiences of people who felt that they had to hide their autistic identity to receive appropriate gender clinic care due to prejudice.



Photographs above (top) shows Niamh Farrell presenting; (below) Busra Besdere delivers their presentation.

Busra Besdere also used interviews and analysis of qualitative data in their talk, which explored primary school teachers' views around supporting the mental health of autistic students in schools. Teacher's lived experience of supporting autistic pupils showed a range of knowledge and various strategies but also indicated that teachers wish to receive more specific training on supporting mental health. We look forward to reading their dissertations and publications in the future and will feature a write up of the May 2026 Cafe Autistique in the next A@M Newsletter.

OPPORTUNITIES IN AUTISM RESEARCH

Language Preferences in Autistic and Non-Autistic Adults

Researchers from Manchester Metropolitan University and the University of Oslo are inviting autistic adults aged 18 or over to take part in an online research study.

What is the study about?

This study explores language preferences, focusing on how people interpret literal and non-literal meanings.

Previous research suggests that people may differ in how they process non-literal language. This study aims to examine whether **autistic and non-autistic adults** show different preferences for **literal and non-literal language**.

Who can take part?

You can take part if you:

- are 18 years or older
- are a native speaker of English
- are autistic or non-autistic

What will I be asked to do?

Complete an online survey (approximately 45 minutes in total)

Answer some basic background questions

Complete short questionnaires

- Indicate your preferences for different descriptions of images
- You may stop taking part at any time.

Is there a reward?

As a thank you, you may choose to enter a prize draw to win one of five £30 vouchers.

Entering the prize draw is optional and does not affect your participation.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Health and Education Research Ethics Committee at MMU.

To find out more and take part, please follow this link:

<https://research.sc/participant/login/dynamic/D3DE3E3F-5AFF-4875-988F-48E48EF29CB2>
[research.sc]

Questions?

Please contact the researcher: Ekaterina Ostashchenko e.ostashchenko@mmu.ac.uk

Study with PDA children and their families

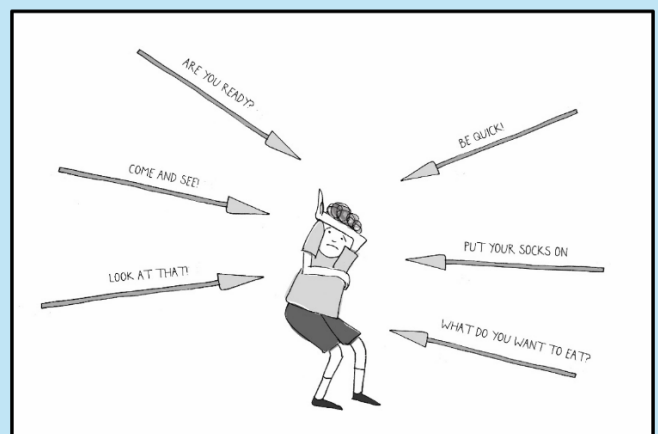


Examining interactions in families with autistic children who experience marked and persistent demand avoidance; Pathological or Extreme Demand Avoidance; and identifying their communication support needs.

- **We're looking for families to take part in new research:-**
- **Is your child autistic and aged 5-11?**
- **Do they experience marked and persistent demand avoidance (or Pathological or Extreme Demand Avoidance – PDA or EDA)?**
- We'll be collecting videoed examples of families interacting and communicating at home with their children in everyday situations. We'd like to work with you to explore your child's communication style and support needs.

Please contact:

alexandra.gillyon@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk for more information. Thank you!



Drawing by Eliza Fricker, used with artist's permission
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