



Research Scholarship Recipient Shares Her Story

When I first completed my undergraduate degree Psychology at the University of Toronto, I knew very little about autism. We had discussed it briefly in class, but at that time it was not as widely researched and publicized as it is today. While searching for a summer job before beginning my M.A. in Clinical Psychology at York University, I came upon an advertisement for a student scholarship for autism research from Autism Ontario. Little did I know at the time that this piece of paper would launch my research career!

The opportunity to do research that could be related to my career was much more captivating and motivating than finding a summer job that would be temporary and unrelated to my work. Although I knew very little about autism at the time, I was intrigued by the topic and wanted to know more about it, especially upon learning that a good friend's brother was diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome. After numerous enthusiastic visits to the library, I learned more about autism, and drafted a research project that I wanted to pursue on the topic of cognitive functions in individuals with Asperger Syndrome. I proposed this project to the Autism Ontario Summer Student Scholarship committee, and received the student award. I was so thrilled to have my first summer job that I would actually look forward to! After this, I spent the majority of my time back in the library, learning more about autism. My interest in autism blossomed and the research that I had proposed to Autism Ontario initiated a set of experiments, which I pursued as my Master's Thesis.

I also began volunteering at the Geneva Centre for Autism as a Social Skills Instructor, where I could practice what I had learned in an applied setting and get a better sense of what it is like to deal with individuals with autism.

In addition to my scholarship, I was successful in being a recipient of a travel bursary from Autism Ontario to attend the most comprehensive annual conference in autism research: International Meeting for Autism Research (IMFAR). This bursary, allowed me to meet top researchers in the field, learn about the most up-to-date research, and network for future collaborations.

Autism Ontario staff also invited students to present at their annual conference, giving us additional opportunities to share our research, meet parents of individuals with autism, and network within the field. The encouragement and support provided by



Autism Ontario staff each year is extremely motivating and provides even more reasons for us to love what we do!

My interest in autism continued into my PhD research at McGill University. I am currently examining the brain regions that are involved in recognizing emotions in facial and vocal expressions, to get a better understanding of why individuals with autism have difficulty with these tasks. Although individuals with autism spectrum disorder display different deficits to different extents, emotional processing deficits are common to all individuals with ASD, and remain at the heart of this disorder. Understanding the most fundamental reasons why this occurs can help us trace the roots of an underlying problem which may cascade to a broad range of symptoms, as seen in ASD.

After completing my PhD, I plan to pursue postdoctoral studies in autism and brain imaging research. From there, I am hoping to work in an academic setting and focus my research on neural correlates of ASD, focusing on how the brain changes after specialized therapy.

I look forward to a fruitful career in autism research.

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