

Can reading fiction help autism disorders?

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A student from the University of Liverpool is investigating the use of fiction to improve social and emotional understanding of people with Autism Spectrum disorders (ASD).

Melissa Chapple, an undergraduate from the University¹'s Institute of

Psychology, Health and Society, has received funding from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) North West doctoral training centre that will enable her to study for a PhD on the effects of reading literature in people with autism.

This new research will explore whether improvements in ToM and self-reflection, in association with the contemplation of fiction, can translate to ASD. It aims to develop a reading intervention that can improve 'metarepresentational' capacity, which means the ability to contemplate and think about mental states.

The funding will help in the development of a pilot study to determine the type of material that is best to use – poetry or different genres of literary fiction – and to identify any problems encountered such as visualisation so that they can be counteracted.

Social understanding

Melissa Chapple, said: "We are seeing more research suggesting that improved theory of mind and empathy due to fiction literature can improve well-being in numerous cognitive conditions.

"Over the past year I have been using popular fiction as a self-intervention to temporarily improve social and emotional understanding of those with an ASD, as I didn't agree with the typical view that people on the spectrum can't compute fiction very well.

"My only issue with the intervention was that I couldn't visualise characters and places, so to counteract that I started assigning actors' faces and images of real places and found the intervention really helped.

"That made me want to explore the potential for fiction as a therapeutic intervention in Autism and Asperger's and to debunk the idea that fiction

isn't compatible with those of us on the spectrum."

Cognitive ability

It is widely acknowledged that ASDs are associated with impaired social cognitive abilities, such as ToM and empathy deficits, which can result in patients struggling with social identification and in making friends.

Currently available ASD interventions attempt to reduce the impact of traits that may compromise wellbeing while enhancing beneficial individual characteristics. These interventions aim to arm patients with a set of 'tools' for combating traits that they find problematic.

Applied behaviour analysis (ABA), which uses learning principles such as reinforcement to increase favourable behaviour, and TEACCH, a multi-dimensional therapy including [cognitive behavioural therapy](#) and skill enhancement, have been found to improve social communication and cognition in ASD.

The strength of these formal interventions is that they are believed to be generalisable, in that parents, carers or the individual themselves can implement the interventions in [everyday life](#) for continued benefits.

Potential

As part of the study a number of one-on-one reading aloud sessions will be conducted using people with an ASD diagnosis. They will then be interviewed to assess the benefits.

Melissa added: "If effective, an informal and voluntary literary reading activity would possess the same generalisable benefit of ABA and TEACCH, by encouraging literary reading in everyday life and by

having the potential for training relatives, friends and/or carers to facilitate the reading intervention."

Provided by University of Liverpool

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