

ABCT ASDD Special Interest Group Discussion Series: July 2023

Current Issues and Controversies in Autism Research: Neurodiversity and NDBIs



Cy Nadler, PhD
Rachel Schuck, PhD
Elisabeth Sheridan, PhD
Zack Williams, BS



Welcome to the ABCT ASDD SIG Discussion Series:
*Current Issues and Controversies in Autism Research:
Neurodiversity and NDBIs*



Please note that this zoom meeting will be recorded when the session begins shortly

Discussion Series panel planning was a collaborative effort-
led by SIG Membership Committee, with support from some
members of the SIG Leadership & the Technology Committee:

- ASDD SIG Membership Committee

- Katie Ahlers, PhD
- Autumn Austin, MA
- Amy Keefer, PhD (Committee Chair)
- Morgan McNair, MA
- Allison Ratto, PhD
- Elisabeth Sheridan, PhD

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Housekeeping During Virtual Era

- This panel is being recorded today to share with registrants who are unable to attend the live presentation
- Please be sure to stay on mute
- Please use the Q&A function in zoom to submit questions that you would like Drs. Nadler & Sheridan to discuss with the panelists

ABCT ASDD SIG July Discussion Series Moderators and Panelists



Moderator: Elisabeth Sheridan, PhD;
she/her/hers

- Director of the Clinical Core, A.J. Drexel Autism Institute
- Associate Professor, Drexel University
- Dr. Sheridan does not have any disclosures related to this talk.

Moderator: Cy Nadler, PhD
he/him/his

- Barnds-Carlson Endowed Professor for Autism, Children's Mercy Kansas City
- Associate Professor of Pediatrics, University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Medicine
- Dr. Nadler does not have any disclosures related to this talk.

Panelist: Rachel Schuck, PhD
she/her/hers

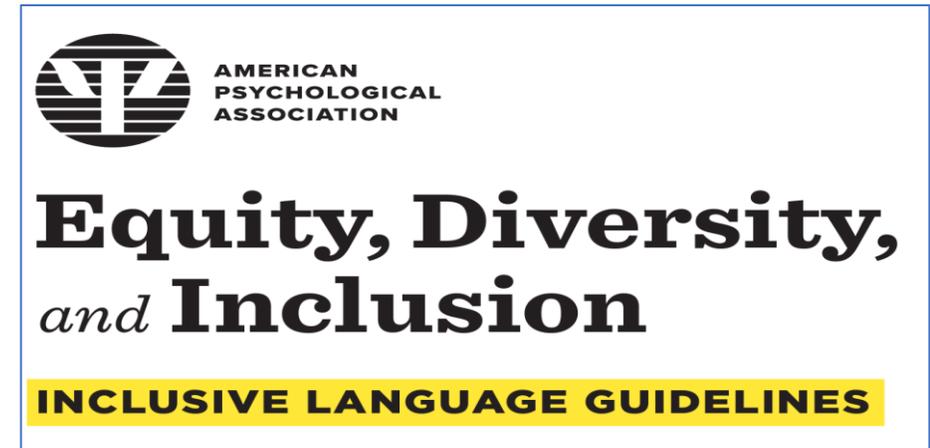
- Postdoctoral Fellow at Department of Administration, Rehabilitation and Postsecondary Education at San Diego State University
- Dr. Schuck is the first author of the paper being discussed today

Panelist: Zack Williams, BS
he/him/his

- MD/PhD Candidate, Vanderbilt School of Medicine
- Year 7 in Medical Scientist Training Program, Neuroscience Graduate Program, Department of Hearing & Speech Services
- Zack is a co-author of the paper being discussed today

Note about language and terminology

- Identity-first vs person-first language
- APA guidance not clear
- Autistic community suggests (mostly?) identity first (e.g., Keating et al., 2022)
- Be aware of the impact of the language we use (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021)



Behavioral Intervention (aka ABA)

- Enacts behavior change through shaping via reinforcement and punishment
- Common intervention for autistic children
- Research shows positive effects
 - Though small effect sizes and very limited longitudinal studies

Concerns about ABA

- **Goals:** Goal of ABA often to make autistic person seem “less autistic” or “more neurotypical”
 - Promotes “masking”/”passing”
 - May not genuinely improve quality of life
- **Methods:** ABA procedures can include aversive punishment, withholding of praise or rewards, planned ignoring of distress, and use of external rewards (e.g. candy, stickers) as well as an emphasis on compliance
- **Outcomes:** Outcomes of ABA are unclear and incompletely studied
 - Evidence weaker than assumed
 - Little empirical work on long-term outcomes
 - Almost no work on adverse effects of ABA
- **Misc:** Several other concerns with ABA and ABA industry (private equity, RBT training/supervision)

STRENGTHS OF NDBIs with Regard to Neurodiversity

- Co-construction & agency in intervention experience
 - Child choice
 - Family partnerships
 - Acknowledge child's internal states (preferences, attitudes, motivations)
- Use of a strengths-based approach
 - Build upon existent strengths & boost confidence
 - Developmentally appropriate goals
 - *Do not* explicitly focus on extinguishing/reducing behaviors
- Emphasis on naturalistic skill building
 - Everyday routines
 - Natural reinforcement
 - Often looks and feels like play time (should arguably even be fun!)

Strategies to Improve NDBIs

- Center Autistic Voices

- Goals should promote quality of life and not conflict with an autistic identity or “way of being”
- Seek out autistic consultants (and/or interventionists) to evaluate intervention goals, intensity, implementation
- Psychoeducation about neurodiversity to clinicians, families, peers, etc.

- Assess Social & Ecological Validity

- What does the *intervention recipient* (not just the family or clinician) think of the intervention?
- Use preference assessments or other observational assessments (Hanley, 2010) to examine social validity in young children who cannot easily report on their preferences
- Research in community organizations

- Research Design

- Community-based partnerships
- Adaptive design
- Adverse event monitoring

Moderated Q&A with Panelists