

Let's Collaborate with Luca on neurodevelopmental traits across the lifespan

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

traits, neurodevelopmental, adhd, mental health, characteristics, conditions, research, diagnostic, people, autistic, initial proposal, symptoms, general population, strengths, luca, factors, mental health conditions, important, interested, project

SPEAKERS

Catherine McDonald, Luca Hargitai

Catherine McDonald 00:01

Hello, and welcome to Let's Collaborate a podcast from the South West Doctoral Training Partnership. I'm your host, Catherine McDonald. And joining me for this episode is Luca Hargitai from the University of Bath and Luca's research is looking to further understand neurodevelopmental traits across the lifespan. So that sounds really interesting. Can you tell me a bit more about that?

Luca Hargitai 00:25

Yes, of course. So, neurodevelopmental conditions themselves are these lifelong conditions, which are linked to differences in the brain. And they affect how people might think might behave might feel. And the classical understanding or the medical approach is to say that someone meets the diagnostic criteria, and they are, say, autistic, or they have ADHD. But the problem with this approach is it misses a lot of the nuance. And there are people who meet the typical cutoff criteria, or people who might meet criteria for multiple conditions at the same time. And if you take a trait approach, which looks at these symptoms, or characteristics themselves, rather than the overarching categories, you can get a better understanding of how these things interact, how they might change over time, how they linked to things like mental health. So that's basically the crux of my research.

Catherine McDonald 01:19

And can you tell me what you mean a little more about traits and characteristics?

Luca Hargitai 01:25

Yes, so a trait I think the most, I guess the simplest way of thinking about it is in terms of personality traits. So someone might be quite high on extraversion, so they might be quite outgoing, or someone might be quite low on extraversion more introverted. So this, this works similarly, with either mental health conditions or neurodevelopmental conditions. So there are these symptoms or characteristics that are typical of people who have ADHD or of autistic people. But you don't have to have autism or ADHD to possess these characteristics. So it's distributed across the general population. And by distributed, I mean, that it's sort of considered in more of a dimensional way, rather than it being you do or don't have autism, or you do or don't have ADHD, or it might be dyslexia or dyscalculia, you have

certain characteristics or certain traits that mean that you are more likely to experience certain difficulties or the reverse, you might have certain strengths as a result of having these characteristics.

Catherine McDonald 02:31

So would I be right in saying then sort of in summary, you're trying to stop sort of the diagnosis of these things being black and white, and to look and delve into the grey a little more.

Luca Hargitai 02:43

Yeah, trying to delve into that grey and taking sort of more of a trans diagnostic view. And this is in line with this movement, this neurodiversity movement that basically is trying to explain that it's not necessarily helpful to categorise people into these boxes. While it is necessary in the current system that we're operating in. To get the help that you need, you have to have this diagnostic label. But actually, once you're through the door, being categorised as someone who is someone who has ADHD or someone who's autistic might not actually be that helpful. It might be that they look at the specific difficulties that you're experiencing, or the specific traits that you have, or specific traits that you have at a higher level, to then tailor that help and that support. So it's less about the overall category and more about the personal characteristics that someone has.

Catherine McDonald 03:36

And so how are you actually conducting this research? What methodology are you using?

Luca Hargitai 03:40

So I am very much a quantitative researcher, but I do plan to integrate some qualitative elements into my project. But at the moment, I am taking this trait based approach. So I'm sampling from the general population. And I'm interested in how people's neurodevelopmental traits so that's their autistic traits or ADHD traits predict their mental health and other life outcomes. And I am also interested in what might underpin this relationship that I have seen between autistic and ADHD traits and poor mental health. So trying to unpick some of those mediating factors. So what might explain the this finding that someone who's typically higher in ADHD traits or typically higher in autistic traits, also tends to experience more symptoms of depression or more symptoms of anxiety? So that's what I'm looking at now. And I'm looking at it in general population adults, but it would be very important to look at this across the lifespan how it might change over time. So looking at children, adolescents, young and older adults and how this might, this trajectory might differ between different groups of people and other characteristics that might influence these these relationships such as basic demographics or any other influencing factor any co-occurring mental health conditions that might impact this or other skills that people might have their education level their sex or their gender identity. So it's just a lot of variables at the moment that I'm trying to fit into my, my research.

Catherine McDonald 05:16

And what's the end goal? What do you ultimately hope it would inform or change?

Luca Hargitai 05:22

So having worked in a mental health setting, I know that while they say that there's a focus on evidence based practice and evidence based therapy, the evidence is very much outdated. A lot of the guidelines that are being followed are based on research that was conducted very long time ago. So when I

worked with clients who had neurodevelopmental conditions, I didn't have clear instructions of how the cognitive behavioural therapy sessions could be adapted to them. I was just told to have this open discussion, ask them what would help and while that is very much important, it would really benefit clinicians to understand what are the factors that could help to promote better mental health or what are the factors that might be leading to worse mental health in this population. So essentially, what I'm trying to achieve with my research is to understand how we can really help this population, how we can target interventions to make them more effective, because if they go and seek mental health support, and it's not effective for them, it will put them off seeking the support later on. Or they might put other people who are also autistic or have ADHD or other neurodevelopmental conditions off of seeking their support, because it won't be helpful. So just trying to essentially help to promote better mental health in this group and better life outcomes. But also, I'm sort of involved in looking at what strengths might arise from having these neurodevelopmental conditions, because we're such a deficit focused, sort of, in such a deficit focused mentality. But actually, there are strengths that might arise from having these differences in the way that they think or the way that they behave. So that's also quite interesting promoting some of that as well.

Catherine McDonald 07:13

It sounds like such a hugely broad ranging project. I wish you all the best of it. Before I let you go, though, just one final question that we're asking everyone. What advice would you give someone who's maybe thinking about doing a PhD and isn't sure if they want to take one on?

Luca Hargitai 07:30

I think the main piece of advice would be everyone has impostor syndrome. And it's just just something that you have to accept that you will inevitably feel whether that's before you even apply, I'll I don't I won't get in or there's no point, no one would be interested in what I have to say, just try to park that and try to just give it a go. Because if you don't try, then you won't get in or you won't succeed. And then I guess the other thing is that it's important to just follow your interests and your ideas. And if something comes up that you didn't think about, but would be really interesting to look at in your project, then don't be afraid to deviate from the original plans. So there's always scope to, I guess, to develop your ideas further, even after you've started. So don't worry too much about that initial proposal, that initial idea that you have to start with, because there's lots to develop down the line and along the way.

Catherine McDonald 08:27

That's brilliant advice Luca. So thank you so much for joining us for this episode. And thank you for listening to Let's Collaborate from the South West Doctoral Training Partnership. This was produced in collaboration with Research Podcasts and recorded at the SWDTP conference in 2023. And don't forget to subscribe wherever you receive your podcasts.