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## Language Difficulties Related To Autism Impede Post-Secondary Adjustment

### What is this research about?

Rates of college/university attendance and completion are low for students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) but we do not know why. Autism-related traits such as pragmatic language difficulties, aloof and rigid personalities may play a role in school adjustment. For instance, pragmatic language is a social skill used to build and maintain relationships needed to thrive in school (e.g. small talk, reading and responding to facial expressions). The researchers investigated if students (without an ASD diagnosis) who had more ASD-related traits also had more difficulty with school adjustment. They also examined if the student's field of study (STEM: science, technology, engineering and math fields or other fields) was related to difficulties with school adjustment and a higher occurrence of ASD-related traits.

### What did the researchers do?

The researchers recruited 134 undergraduate students (44 males, 89 females) enrolled at Simon Fraser University through courses and flyers in the school hallways. Neither the participants nor their immediate family members had an ASD diagnosis. The researchers administered the Broad Autism Phenotype Questionnaire – which measures pragmatic language difficulties, aloof personality, and rigid personality – to assess the broad autism phenotype (BAP). They also conducted the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire to measure

### What you need to know:

Students with higher levels of ASD-related traits had a harder time adjusting to post-secondary education. The different levels of traits, particularly pragmatic language, partially explained why students in STEM fields had more difficulties with school adjustment compared to students in non-STEM fields.

academic, social, and personal-emotional coping with the school environment.

### What did the researchers find?

The researchers grouped 18 students together based on their BAP cut-off score in at least two of the three domains (aloof personality, pragmatic language difficulties, and rigid personality) in the questionnaire. A matching non-BAP group was selected based on gender and time enrolled in school. The researchers found that those in the BAP group scored lower on academic and social adjustment compared to the non-BAP group.

The researchers then looked at the student's major. Compared to students in non-STEM fields, students in STEM fields scored higher on aloof personality and pragmatic language difficulties, but not on rigid personality. They also scored lower on academic adjustment, but not on social or personal-emotional coping. By looking at these characteristics, the researchers found that pragmatic

language difficulties contributed the most to lower scores on academic adjustment in students in STEM fields, explaining 55% of the difference in academic adjustment between STEM and non-STEM students.

## How can you use this research?

This study can be used by academic staff to understand the difficulties that particular students face with adjusting to the academic environment. The results also suggest specific areas to be targeted by support services in order to promote post-secondary enrollment of people with ASD.

## About the Researchers

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## Citation

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## Keywords

Post-Secondary Education, College, School Adjustment, Pragmatic Language

This research summary was written by Roksana Khalid and Dr. Jonathan Lai for the Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research. This research summary, along with other summaries, can be found on our [blog](#) and at [asdmentalhealth.ca/research-summaries](http://asdmentalhealth.ca/research-summaries)

## About the Chair

The Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research is dedicated to studying ways to improve the mental health and well-being of people with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and their families in Canada.

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For more information, visit the Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research website at [asdmentalhealth.ca](http://asdmentalhealth.ca)

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