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An account of presenting a poster at the 16th Research Students' Education Conference (RSEC) at the University of Leeds

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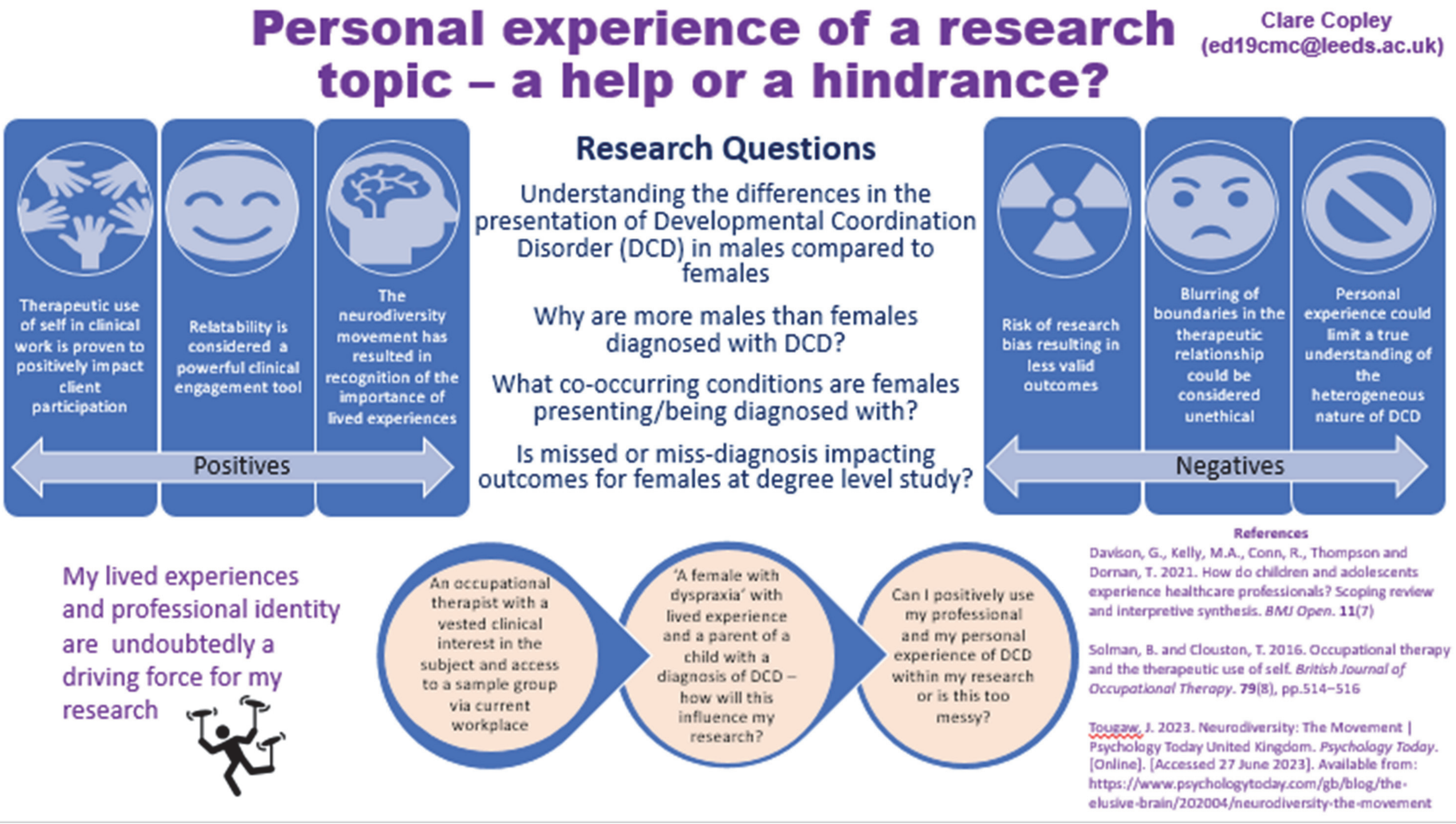
Personal Experience of a Research Topic - a Help or a Hindrance?

This year's Research Students' Education Conference (RSEC) held at the University of Leeds on 19th July 2023 focussed upon the theme of 'messy research'. Considering my own PhD research challenges and 'messy research', I chose to reflect upon my personal connection with my chosen area of study. My PhD is concerned with exploring sex and gender differences in growing up with Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD) with specific consideration of mental health issues experienced by females with DCD and the impact of this as they transition into higher education. Traditionally, there has been male bias within neurodevelopmental research (Santos et al., 2022). This has implications for missed or misdiagnosis for women and girls, who tend to present with complex co-occurring conditions, which can hinder diagnostic processes and limit access to support within health and education settings (Young et al., 2018).

As an occupational therapist by profession, I work with young adults within higher education, many of whom are neurodivergent and some experience difficulties specifically relating to DCD. In addition to my professional experience, I have always been vocal about being the proud parent of a child with DCD and how, like many mothers before me, this led to some self-realisation about lifelong difficulties I have had, resulting in my own diagnosis of DCD in recent years. Both my clinical practice and personal experiences have undoubtedly driven me professionally and instilled a passion and determination to contribute to making positive change – which ultimately is why I began on my PhD journey. However, I have sometimes considered if there is a negative aspect to these experiences. I have questioned if I am at risk of jeopardising my own research with a personal bias relating to DCD, which could blur boundaries within my professional relationships. When exploring the conference theme of 'messy research', I began to consider if I am conscious enough of how my own experience of DCD differs from that of others due to the heterogeneous nature of the condition. It is important to ensure that my personal connection with DCD does not limit my knowledge and understanding of how diversely the condition can present.

I am well versed with the concept of self-reflection, it forms a crucial aspect of my working practice and guides much of my clinical judgment (Krueger et al., 2020). However, completing this poster enabled discussions with my academic supervisors who encouraged a process of reflexivity. Unlike reflection, which is largely completed retrospectively to consider what could be done differently to enhance practice, reflexivity encourages consideration of your positionality. Positionality within research requires an acknowledgment of the position that an individual adopts within their research based upon personal identity and world views (Holmes, 2020). Within research, reflexivity can be used to consider beliefs, judgements, and bias throughout the whole process, guiding a theory of knowledge and approaches (Jamieson et al., 2023). This was



Personal experience of a research topic – a help or a hindrance?

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Positives

Therapeutic use of self in clinical work is proven to positively impact client participation

Relatability is considered a powerful clinical engagement tool

The neurodiversity movement has resulted in recognition of the importance of lived experiences

Research Questions

Understanding the differences in the presentation of Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD) in males compared to females

Why are more males than females diagnosed with DCD?

What co-occurring conditions are females presenting/being diagnosed with?

Is missed or miss-diagnosis impacting outcomes for females at degree level study?

Negatives

Risk of research bias resulting in less valid outcomes

Blurring of boundaries in the therapeutic relationship could be considered unethical

Personal experience could limit a true understanding of the heterogeneous nature of DCD

My lived experiences and professional identity are undoubtedly a driving force for my research

An occupational therapist with a vested clinical interest in the subject and access to a sample group via current workplace

'A female with dyspraxia' with lived experience and a parent of a child with a diagnosis of DCD – how will this influence my research?

Can I positively use my professional and my personal experience of DCD within my research or is this too messy?

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Figure 1 - Clare Copley's Poster

helpful in reframing my concerns and to consider how using my knowledge and lived experience can potentially help rather than hinder my research practice. I am reassured that transparency about my personal experiences could enrich my study design through a process of thoughtful engagement (Jamieson et al., 2023). Open and honest discussions with myself, my academic supervisors, peers, and stakeholders at different stages of my research could help me to gain a deeper understanding of my position, enriching my study and therapeutic relationships.

Presenting my poster resulted in an unexpected and welcome development within my research. The overall reaction of peers and conference delegates to my poster seemed to echo much of the findings about the importance of lived experiences when considering neurodivergence (Tougaw, 2023). There was a general acknowledgement that with personal experience can come passion, drive, and determination, which many felt was an essential component of postgraduate study. It was encouraging to hear from other researchers with a personal experience or connection to their own research. This once again demonstrated the motivation and undeniable insight that can be gained from lived experience.

Biography

Clare Copley is an occupational therapist and a second year PGR. Clare's research is concerned with young women's experiences of Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD) and the impact upon mental health and academic outcomes. Clare has lived experience of DCD and is keen to consider how this might make her research 'messy'.

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