

Holly E. A. Sutherland, PhD, MPhil

Personal Profile

Postdoctoral researcher with an interdisciplinary focus on social communication and neurodiversity. I have a strong research background of both quantitative and qualitative methods and analyses, often deployed in a mixed-methods context. I produce high-quality research with real-world impact: my work has been used by the Cabinet Office and the U.S. Department of the Interior, and I have provided autism and neurodiversity training for charities and services both in the UK and internationally. References available on request.

Education

Clinical Brain Sciences PhD, University of Edinburgh 2020-2025
4-year PhD funded by Medical Research Scotland and Scottish Autism. Research thesis title: “‘The same but entirely different’: reframing autistic social communicative (dys)function through mixed methods research”. Supervised by Prof. Fletcher-Watson and Dr. Crompton of the University of Edinburgh, and Dr. Long of Scottish Autism. Examined at viva by Prof. Martyn Pickersgill and Dr. Amy Pearson. See appendix for abstract.

Applied & Theoretical Linguistics MPhil (Distinction), University of Cambridge 2017-2018
Modules included psycholinguistics, computational linguistics, experimental pragmatics, syntax, semantics, phonology, language death, and multiple statistics training courses. Research thesis title: “The link between executive functioning deficits and impaired metaphor comprehension in high-functioning autistic spectrum disorders”. Supervised by Prof. Napoleon Katsos. See appendix for abstract.

Linguistics BA Hons (1st), University College London 2014-2017
Modules included neurolinguistics, semantics, pragmatics, child language acquisition, programming in Java, introduction to AI, syntax, morphology, phonetics, phonology. Thesis title: “Impaired metaphor comprehension in individuals with autistic spectrum disorder as symptom of impaired interhemispheric coordination and functional connectivity”. Supervised by Prof. Richard Breheny. See appendix for abstract.

Berkhamsted School, England 2012-2014
Biology (A*), Maths (A), Physics (A) A levels; EPQ Dissertation (A*); 2 IGCSEs (A*A)

American School of Warsaw, Poland 2010-2012

Aylesbury High School, England 2007-2010

Employment

Postdoctoral associate, MMLL, University of Cambridge 2024-26
Interdisciplinary project exploring the linguistics of midrash (a form of Jewish Biblical exegesis). We aim to discover what linguistic features characterise midrash; and what

cognitive traits (bilingualism, neurodivergence, creativity etc.) impact people's skill with midrash-like interpretative practices. Our psycholinguistic findings are, more broadly, applicable to thinking about different forms of text interpretation, and to understanding how people interpret ambiguous language in low-context settings.

EDI Intern, Development & Alumni, University of Edinburgh 2023-24

Worked to support the planning and delivery of initiatives to, attract, develop, and retain a diverse staff group in the Development & Alumni office. Implemented recommendations designed to strengthen equality, diversity, and inclusion in the office, to achieve sustainable and lasting change.

Administrative Intern, ITAKOM Conference 2023

Assisted with administration and promotion for an international conference of 1000+ attendees. Designed abstract books, created promotional materials (images, videos, text) and website copy, managed social media channels, interviewed speakers, and liaised with external individuals and companies on behalf of the conference.

Research Assistant, Usher Institute, University of Edinburgh 2020-2021

Co-designed online surveys, and conducted semi-structured interviews, surveying Medical School staff and student experiences with/opinions on equality, diversity, and inclusion at the University. Analysed data using thematic analysis, including developing a coding scheme. Produced a literature review on student equality, diversity, and inclusion in university medical departments. Managed a team of 10 undergraduate medical students as research assistants.

Research Assistant, Winton Centre, University of Cambridge 2019-2020

Ran two 1,000+ participant online studies assessing risk matrix designs for improved communication of risk; my improved design was used by the Cabinet Office in the 2020 UK National Risk Register. Produced a systematic literature review on communication of quality of scientific evidence to the public. Assisted with public engagement activities including talks and workshops.

Research Assistant, Department of Informatics, University of Sussex 2018-2019

Developed cognitive profiling measures to assess individual differences in diagram comprehension, and deployed them via online survey. Assisted development of a behavioural coding scheme for videos of diagram production. Produced a literature review on individual differences in diagram comprehension. Developed a novel diagram taxonomy.

Administrative, Teaching, & Service Activities

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| • Conference organisation team member for XPrag 2025 | 2025 |
| • Postdoctoral Research Associate @ Trinity Hall, Cambridge | 2024-2026 |
| • MBChB tutor (SEAM modules) | 2023-2024 |
| • Interviewer for "Eating Disorders & Autism" project | 2023 |
| • Cohort representative, MRS doctoral students | 2022-2024 |
| • Lab manual co-manager for the EdInMind lab | 2022-2024 |
| • President & Events Organiser for two UCLU student societies | 2015-2017 |

Research & Technical Skills

- Qualitative methods (developing interview guides; structured and semi-structured interviews; focus groups; participant observation; ethnographic and autoethnographic methods) and analysis (thematic analysis, framework analysis, grounded theory).
- Quantitative methods (designing/running online surveys & questionnaires; using cognitive testing batteries; 1-to-1 participant testing; repurposing/modification of existing tests; designing novel tests; developing behavioural coding schemes) and analysis (descriptive statistics; data visualisation; linear modelling; non-parametric tests).
- Working with diverse participant populations, including autistic people and people with intellectual disabilities.
- Strong computer skills. Proficient in R Studio, E-Prime, Qualtrics, Stata, LaTeX, the Adobe Creative suite, and the Microsoft Office suite.
- Experience with coding. Proficient in R; some experience with HTML, CSS, and Java; comfortable self-teaching new programming languages.
- Performing literature reviews and systematic literature reviews.
- Writing and contributing to academic papers, posters, lay research summaries, and lay and academic research talks.
- Open science and reproducibility skills, including: preregistration, preparing data and analysis code for open-access sharing, and doing reproductions.
- Collaborative online/remote working, including running online studies.

Research & Skills Training

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| • Creative Research Methods | 2023, 2024 |
| • "Approaches to understanding dyadic interactions" workshop | 2023 |
| • "Conversation Analysis and Healthcare Encounters" (Oxford; 2 days) | 2023 |
| • "Institutional Ethnography" (NCRM; 2 days) | 2023 |
| • "Observational & ethnographic methods" (NCRM; 1 day) | 2022 |
| • Active bystander training | 2021 |

Publications

- Donaldson, S.*, Sutherland, H.E.A.*, Fletcher-Watson, S. (2025). Doing research in services for autistic people with complex support needs: Challenges and considerations based on UK experiences. *Autism*, 0(0). (*Joint first authors)
- Sutherland, H.E.A., Axbey, H., Sharp, M., Ropar, D., Fletcher-Watson, S., Crompton, C. J. How successfully do autistic and non-autistic raters guess the diagnostic status of autistic and non-autistic people having conversations? *Under review in Neurodiversity*.
- Sutherland, H.E.A., Crompton, C.J., Long, J., Fletcher-Watson, S. (2025). 'A difference in typical values': autistic perspectives on autistic social communication. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, 27(1), 313-329.

- Sutherland, H., Crompton, C. J., Long, J., & Fletcher-Watson, S. (2025). 'Read My Lips, Not My Body': A Thematic Analysis of Autistic People's Social Communication Preferences, Experiences, and Expectations. *Neurodiversity*, 3.
- Sutherland, H.E.A., Axbey, H., Sharp, M., Ropar, D., Fletcher-Watson, S., Catherine J. Crompton (2024). How successfully do autistic and non-autistic raters guess the diagnostic status of autistic and non-autistic people having conversations? *Dataset*.
- Sutherland, H. E. A., Zahir, R., McKinney, A. (2024) It takes all kinds of minds: organising an accessible conference. *The Psychologist*, 26-27.
- Sutherland, H.E.A., Recchia, G., Dryhurst, S., & Freeman, A. L. (2022). How People Understand Risk Matrices, and How Matrix Design Can Improve their Use: Findings from Randomized Controlled Studies. *Risk Analysis*, 42(5), 1023-1041.
- Sutherland, H.E.A., Recchia, G., Freeman, A.L.J, Dryhurst, S., Protopopescu, R. (2021). Risk Matrix Comprehension. *Dataset*.
- Stockdill, A., Raggi, D., Jamnik, M., Garcia, G.G., Sutherland, H.E.A., Cheng, P.C.H., & Sarkar, A. (2020). Correspondence-based analogies for choosing problem representations. In *2020 IEEE Symposium on Visual Languages and Human-Centric Computing (VL/HCC)* (pp. 1-5). IEEE.
- Raggi, D., Stockdill, A., Jamnik, M., Garcia, G.G., Sutherland, H.E.A., & Cheng, P.C.H. (2020). Dissecting representations. In *International Conference on Theory and Application of Diagrams* (pp. 144-152). Springer, Cham.
- Stockdill, A., Raggi, D., Jamnik, M., Garcia, G.G., Sutherland, H.E.A., Cheng, P.C.H., & Sarkar, A. (2020). Cross-domain Correspondences for Explainable Recommendations. In *ExSS-ATEC@ IUI*.
- Cheng, P.C.H., Garcia, G.G., Sutherland, H.E.A., Raggi, D., Stockdill, A. and Jamnik, M., (2019). Elucidating the Cognitive Anatomy of Representation Systems. In *CogSci*.
- Raggi, D., Stockdill, A., Jamnik, M., Garcia, G.G., Sutherland, H.E.A., & Cheng, P. C. H. (2019). Inspection and selection of representations. In *International Conference on Intelligent Computer Mathematics* (pp. 227-242). Springer, Cham.

Invited Speaker

- Sutherland, H.E.A. (2025, November) *Teaching for Every Mind: Embracing Neurodiversity in the Classroom*. Middletown Centre for Autism, Middletown, Northern Ireland.
- Sutherland, H.E.A. (2025, November) *Doing ethnographic research with autistic people with high support needs*. Methods@Manchester, University of Manchester, Manchester, England.
- Sutherland, H.E.A. (2025, September) *Human-AI teaming: Whose voices are missing?* Centre for Assuring Autonomy Symposium, York, England.
- Sutherland, H.E.A. (2025, May). "*Communicatively resourceful, interpretatively curious*": (mis)communications in social care settings for autistic people with high support needs. International Society for Autism Research Annual Meeting, Seattle, USA.
- Sutherland, H.E.A. (2025, April) *Neuro-affirming support for autistic people with high support needs: what's different?* Middletown Centre for Autism, online.

- Sutherland, H.E.A. (2025, April) *Neuro-affirming support for autistic people: Some basic principles*. Middletown Centre for Autism, online.
- Sutherland, H.E.A. (2025, March) *What is neuro-affirming practice?* National Autistic Society Annual Conference, online.
- Sutherland, H.E.A. (2025, March) *How does the double empathy problem impact care/support services for autistic people with high support needs?* Therapist Neurodiversity Collective, online.
- Sutherland, H.E.A. (2025, January) *Ethnography, neurodiversity, and high support needs*. Methods North West Seminar, University of Manchester, online.
- Sutherland, H.E.A. (2024, November) *What does the neurodiversity paradigm have to say about autistic people with high support needs?* Autism Masters guest lecture, University of Stirling, online.
- Sutherland, H.E.A. (2024, September) *Friendships, fear, and (double) empathy*. Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, England.
- Sutherland, H.E.A. (2024, April) *Social communication and interaction: what autistic people want you to know*. College of Psychiatrists of Ireland Spring Conference, Mullingar, Republic of Ireland.
- Sutherland, H.E.A. (2023, November) *Talking to autistic people: what autistic people want you to know*. Euregional Congressburo, online.
- Sutherland, H.E.A. (2023, October). *Neuro-affirming support and intellectual disability: where do we start?*. Therapist Neurodiversity Collective, online.
- Sutherland, H.E.A. (2023, October) *Autistic perspectives on autistic communication*. Scottish Autism Annual Conference, online.
- Sutherland, H.E.A. (2023, March). *Peer communication amongst neurodivergent people*. Edinburgh Psychiatry Society Neurodiversity Conference, Edinburgh, Scotland.
- Sutherland, H.E.A. (2023, March). *“Whose “support” is it anyway?: A critical look at supportive environments*. It Takes All Kinds Of Minds Conference, Edinburgh, Scotland.
- Sutherland, H.E.A. (2022) *‘I was brought up in an NT-speaking household’: autistic perspectives on autistic communication*. British Psychological Society Seminar Series on Double Empathy and Autism, online.
- Sutherland, H. E. A. (2021, November). *Neurodiversity: similarities vs. differences panel discussion*. Salvesen Annual Lecture, Edinburgh, Scotland.

Talks & Poster Presentations

- Weiss, D., Sutherland, H.E.A., Reuven, L., Katsos, N. *God, Midrash, and Linguistic Creativity*. Alumni Festival, Cambridge, England.
- Sutherland, H.E.A. (2025, September) *The double empathy problem in support services for autistic people with high support needs: a UK-based ethnographic study*. Autism Europe Congress, Dublin, Republic of Ireland.
- Sutherland, H.E.A. (2024, September) *Friendships, fear, and (double) empathy*. ARCH seminar series, Kings College University, online.

- Sutherland, H.E.A., Axbey, H., Sharp, M., Ropar, D., Fletcher-Watson, S., Crompton, C.J. (2024, June) *How does social context affect observers' ability to identify autism in others?* [Speaker presentation]. Neurodevelopment Annual Seminar, University of East Anglia, Norwich, England.
- Sutherland, H.E.A., Crompton, C.J., Long, J., & Fletcher-Watson, S. (2024, May). *An (auto)ethnographic study of the double empathy problem in social care services for autistic people with high support needs.* [Poster presentation]. International Society for Autism Research Annual Meeting, Melbourne, Australia.
- Crompton, C.J., Webber, C., Fotheringham F., Cebula, K, Foley, S., Sutherland, H.E.A. & Fletcher-Watson, S (2024). *Exploring the feasibility and effectiveness of a co-designed and neurodivergent-led peer support program for neurodivergent high school students.* [Poster presentation]. International Society for Autism Research Annual Meeting, Melbourne, Australia.
- Sutherland, H.E.A., Crompton, C.J., Long, J., & Fletcher-Watson, S. (2023, May). *"Read my lips, not my body": the joys and challenges of autistic social communication.* [Speaker presentation]. Scottish Autism Research Group Conference, University of Stirling, Stirling, Scotland.
- Sutherland, H.E.A., Crompton, C.J., Long, J., & Fletcher-Watson, S. (2023, May). *"Read My Lips, Not My Body": Autistic Perspectives on Communicating with (non-)Autistic People.* [Poster presentation]. International Society for Autism Research Annual Meeting, Stockholm, Sweden.
- Sutherland, H.E.A. (2023, April). *Social communication in autism: the autistic perspective.* [Speaker presentation]. Centre for Autism Research Science Meeting, University of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, USA.
- Sutherland, H.E.A., Protopopescu, R. (2022, November). *What's the risk?* University of Cambridge's Winton Centre Finale, London, England.
- Sutherland, H.E.A., Crompton, C.J., Long, J., & Fletcher-Watson, S. (2022, October). *Understanding (and accommodating) an autistic social communicative 'style' to support autistic wellbeing.* [Poster presentation]. Autism-Europe International Congress, Krakow, Poland.
- Sutherland, H. E. A., Ropar, D., Fletcher-Watson, S., Axbey, H., Sharp, M., Crompton, C. (2022, October). *Are social difficulties in autism context-dependent? Investigating how conversational partners affect the accuracy of observers' judgements about a person's autistic diagnostic status.* [Poster presentation]. Autism-Europe International Congress, Krakow, Poland.
- Sutherland, H.E.A., Crompton, C.J., Long, J., & Fletcher-Watson, S. (2022, July). *Autistic social communication: 'a minefield of problems', or 'a difference in typical values'?* [Poster presentation]. Autistica Research Festival, online.
- Sutherland, H. E. A., Ropar, D., Fletcher-Watson, S., Axbey, H., Sharp, M., Crompton, C. (2022, July) *Investigating (non-)autistic success at identifying (non-)autistic people in videos and pictures.* [Poster presentation]. Autistica Research Festival, online.

- Sutherland, H.E.A. (2022, May). *The key is acceptance: Exploring autistic adults' social communicative wants, needs, and expectations*. [Speaker presentation]. ARCH Research Showcase, Kings College London, London, England.
- Sutherland, H.E.A., Crompton, C.J., Long, J., & Fletcher-Watson, S. (2022, May). *An 'autistic communicative style'? Exploring autistic people's social communication preferences*. [Poster presentation]. International Society for Autism Research Annual Meeting, Texas, USA.
- Sutherland, H. E. A., Ropar, D., Fletcher-Watson, S., Axbey, H., Sharp, M., Crompton, C. (2022, July). *Investigating the accuracy of people's judgements about social dyads' autistic diagnostic status from videos of social interaction*. [Poster presentation.] International Society for Autism Research Annual Meeting, Texas, USA.
- Finikarides, L., Sutherland, H.E.A. (2019). *Communicating risks and benefits in numbers and words*. [Workshop]. Patient Information Forum's Health Literacy Training Workshop, London, England.

Awards & Prizes

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| • INSAR autistic researcher grant | 2024 |
| • Medical Research Scotland 4-year PhD studentship | 2019 |
| • UCL Dean's List (top attaining 5% of students) | 2017 |

Appendix

MPhil Thesis Abstract

Studies in neurotypical populations and various clinical populations have implicated executive functioning as playing a pivotal role in the metaphor comprehension process. However, though executive functioning and metaphor comprehension deficits are well attested in autistic spectrum conditions, there is little research on the link between the two in this population.

The present study assessed a range of executive function cognitive domains (generativity, set shifting, inhibition, and working memory) as well as tasks examining the ability to identify and explain metaphors in 10 autistic participants without intellectual disability (mean age 24.10 years, 5 females) and 13 non-autistic participants (mean age 26.50 years, 7 females). Results showed significant response inhibition and metaphor identification impairments in the autistic group. Near-significant group differences were also found on the metaphor explanation task, with autistic participants numerically but not significantly more likely to give concrete or incorrect explanations. Higher generativity and response inhibition scores correlated positively and significantly with faster and more accurate metaphor identification, and with a higher quality of metaphor explication in both groups. The effect of group interaction on these correlations was not significant – indicating that both autistic and non-autistic groups had the same profile of executive functioning contribution to metaphor comprehension.

The study points to executive functioning deficits as explaining the impairment of and variance in metaphor comprehension in autistic individuals without intellectual disability.

PhD Thesis Abstract

Autistic social communication has often been framed as ‘deficient’, in comparison to the implied ideal social communication style of nonautistic people. Research has likewise focused on nonautistic people’s experiences of and perspectives on autistic social communication, and the ways in which the autistic social communication style is difficult for nonautistic people to understand. However, increasing involvement of the autistic community in research, alongside the work of autistic academics, has begun to challenge this perspective. Concepts such as the neurodiversity paradigm and the double empathy problem have emerged from this context, both of which emphasise a) the natural diversity of human dispositions, including social and communicative dispositions, and b) the role that context and environment plays in enabling or disabling people, including the role of the social environment in enabling or disabling social communication.

Despite this, there remains a dearth of research exploring the autistic perspective on social communication, and exploring what an autistic social communicative style (absent deficit-focused comparisons to a nonautistic one) might look like. The research in this thesis provides rich qualitative descriptions of autistic sociality and communicative experiences, as

well as examining how social environments can render autistic people's social communication (dys)functional, through four studies.

In an effort to understand and characterise the autistic social communicative style, Study 1 explores the social communication behaviours of nine autistic adults (4 women, 1 non-binary, 4 men, aged 23-70) via a two-week-long online focus group, focusing on their experiences and perspectives. The topics covered how participants signal (dis)interest and (un)enjoyment in conversations, their natural social communication behaviours, and the differences in their experiences of interacting with autistic compared to nonautistic people. The critical realist thematic analysis reveals five key themes: different social communication experiences, different social communication expectations, conflicts with neurotypical-normative social expectations, compensation and masking, and finding shared understandings. From these themes, drawing on the social model of disability, a conceptual model is developed to illustrate how (often-neuronormative) social environments interact with an autistic communicative style to produce either miscommunication and masking or fulfilling social encounters.

Study 2 draws on the findings from Study 1 to further explore the autistic social communicative style, at a less featural and more abstract level, with a focus on how autistic and nonautistic communication styles differ. Another online focus group was run over two weeks, with eight autistic adults (7 women, 1 non-binary). Participants discussed their social values, experiences interacting with nonautistic people, and positive social interactions. They also provided feedback on each other's contributions, and on the themes from the previous focus group. Through reflexive thematic analysis, five themes were identified: "Always be truthful"; "Invisible demands and their impacts"; "I don't think neurotypical people do the same for us"; "Autistic strengths, autistic positives"; and "The role of autistic community". The findings highlight how differing social communication expectations and experiences can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts between autistic and nonautistic individuals. It emphasises the role that honesty, authenticity, sensory differences, accommodation of others, and non-normative sources of joy play in defining the autistic social communicative style.

To investigate how social contexts impact (non)autistic social interactions from an outside perspective, Study 3 investigates how observers' ability to identify autistic individuals is impacted by their conversational partner's neurotype. Autistic and nonautistic raters were shown videos (n=78; 39 autistic) and photos (n=54; 27 autistic) of interactions between autistic and nonautistic people, in same- and mixed-neurotype dyads. Raters were asked to determine whether each participant in the interactions was autistic. Analysis (primarily via a generalised linear model) reveals that raters identify autistic individuals at rates better than chance. However, identification accuracy varies significantly based on contextual factors such as dyad type, stimulus type, and rater neurotype. Most notably, autistic-autistic dyads make identifying autism very difficult. This is perhaps because observers are using social awkwardness as a proxy for autism identification, despite autistic-autistic interactions having good rapport. Autistic and nonautistic raters also have different

patterns of accuracy, with nonautistic raters more likely to assume participants were nonautistic. These findings emphasise the role that social context, observer neurotype, and social biases play in the perception of autistic social communication by observers, and also the role they play in defining the outcomes of autistic social communication.

Study 4 takes the findings from Studies 1-3, and applies them to a real-world setting, in a novel context for explorations of cross-neurotype communication from an autistic perspective: a social care setting for autistic adults with high support needs. This ethnographic study took place at two day-support services, over the course of a year, and involved participant observations and interviews, alongside reflexive and autoethnographic process by the (autistic) researcher. Analysis of the data via grounded theory produced four core concepts: “Part of a larger whole”; “Fear and control”; “Friends, favourites, and coexistence”; and “Who are we? Who are they?”. These concepts emphasise the role of contextual factors in governing the relationship between staff and the autistic people they support; the complex playing-out of different kinds of power within staff-supported people relations; the depth and nuance of cross-neurotype friendships and interactions in an institutional setting; and open questions around authority, knowledge production, and the provision of care in a high-support-needs context.

Collectively, the findings from these studies inform the synthesis of a novel theory of autistic social communication, Theory of (Un)Known Mind (ToUKM). Drawing on also extant sociological, psychological, and neurological literature, ToUKM seeks to reconcile recent findings centred around the double empathy problem (including those from this thesis) with the body of literature on autistic theory of mind difficulties. ToUKM posits that nonautistic people achieve 'mind-reading' by socially and mentally aligning with one another (i.e. by making their behaviours and beliefs more like those of the people they are interacting with), making them more predictable and understandable; whereas autistic individuals do not engage in this social alignment. This divergence leads to different theories about the knowability and significance of others' mental states, creating a fundamental conflict that contributes to social dysfunction between autistic and nonautistic individuals.

The findings presented in this thesis offer a comprehensive examination of autistic social communication, through challenging deficit-based models and emphasising autistic social communication as a social communication 'style' that requires study in its own right. It highlights that differences in social communication between autistic and nonautistic individuals reflect distinct communicative styles, shaped by varying social expectations and contexts (Studies 1 & 2). It reveals that misunderstandings and communication difficulties often arise from these differences, rather than per se from inherent impairments (Studies 1-3). It proposes a context-sensitive and non-pathologizing theory for the mechanisms behind these cross-neurotype misunderstandings (Theory of (Un)Known Mind). And, by exploring the interplay between autistic and nonautistic communication styles (Study 4), this thesis underscores the importance of including autistic perspectives in the production of knowledge about autistic social communication. This thesis therefore advocates for a shift – in autism research, and in autism researchers' perspectives – towards an approach that

values and accommodates autistic communication as a valid and complex style of social interaction, with implications for improving social understanding between autistic and nonautistic people.