Early Career Research Award Application Cover Sheet

Entry Title: Improving the mental health of autistic adults through the cultivation of self-compassion

Name of Applicant: Dr Chris Edwards & Dr Ru Ying Cai

Organisation: Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect)

1.Additional Information (372/400 words)

Our research journey started when Ru first started practising self-compassion to help her manage the pressures of finishing the final year of her PhD. A few months after starting work at Aspect, she wanted to learn about the self-compassion experience of autistic adults and, to her surprise, found no research. Since Ru felt that she developed more resilience through practising self-compassion skills, she hypothesised that doing similar practices would also help autistic adults. She engaged her friend and colleague, Dr Lydia Brown, to write a theoretical paper on the potential benefits of self-compassion for autistic adults. They hoped this paper would encourage more research on self-compassion by autism researchers.

After the theoretical paper was published, Ru's drive to conduct empirical research in this space increased due to hearing stories about the common difficulties that research participants on the autism spectrum experienced, such as bullying and being stigmatised and traumatised by their pasts. Her heart went out to the autistic adults she spoke to. Through the support of the Aspect Research Centre for Autism Practice (ARCAP), they conducted the world's first empirical research on the self-compassion experiences of autistic adults. Based on the findings from the study, Chris and Ru co-designed and co-produced a self-guided, online self-compassion program (ASPAA). As somebody who struggles with anxiety as a late-diagnosed autistic adult, Chris was interested in exploring self-compassion as a concept for himself and his community.

ASPAA incorporated autism-specific content, including lived experience videos of autistic adults talking about their self-compassion and self-critical experiences and tailored self-compassion practises. We have piloted this program with 39 Australian autistic adults, which assessed the feasibility, acceptability and outcomes related to completing ASPAA. All participants accepted the program, and the program's feasibility was demonstrated through the ease of recruitment and low attrition rate. Overall, participants who completed this program had increased self-compassion levels, psychological well-being, positive affect, decreased negative affect, emotion regulation difficulties, and symptoms of anxiety and depression. Participants described how they experienced benefits and difficulties in practising self-compassion but recognised that it takes time and practice to become more self-compassionate. They also reported that they developed a more accepting and kinder attitude toward themselves, better regulation of challenging emotions, and an increased sense of connection with others.

2. Focus

Describe how your research illustrates Innovation, Best Practice and or Excellence (166/200 words)

The ASPAA pioneers mental health innovation with the first global self-compassion program designed for autistic individuals, showcasing originality by adapting a proven concept to a unique and underserved group. This initiative not only fills a crucial gap in mental health care but also demonstrates significant potential through pilot data, which includes both quantitative pre- and post-measures and qualitative feedback to refine the program. Its success in enhancing the well-being of autistic participants represents a revolutionary shift in therapeutic methods, marking a significant impact on mental health practices and services. The ASPAA's research excellence shines through its ground-breaking insights into the effectiveness of bespoke mental health interventions, pushing the boundaries of how mental health issues are understood and treated. By integrating a comprehensive and nuanced approach, this work exemplifies exceptional quality in early career research, establishing new standards for innovation, best practice, and excellence in addressing the mental health needs of a vulnerable community, thereby contributing to a broader and more inclusive understanding of mental health care.

3. Potential Impact

Summarise the potential contribution to and/or implications for the wider community (199/200 words)

The ASPAA is available to autistic adults for free via Aspect's webpage. Nearly 600 autistic adults have registered to access the program since its launch in August 2023. We have also designed a clinician version with recommendations on how clinicians could support their autistic clients in cultivating self-compassion. So far, over 30 clinicians have paid to access it.

The program of work that led to the creation and evaluation of the ASPAA has resulted in numerous peer-reviewed publications:

- Cultivating self-compassion to improve mental health in autistic adults.
- "Self-compassion changed my life": The self-compassion experiences of autistic and non-autistic adults and its relationship with mental health and psychological wellbeing.
- The inter-relationship of emotion regulation, self-compassion and mental health in autistic adults.
- A qualitative exploration of an autism-specific self-compassion program: The ASPAA.
- Self-compassion improves emotion regulation and mental health: A pilot study of an online self-compassion program for autistic adults.

Research findings from the ASPAA have or will be presented nationally and internationally, including at the International Society for Autism Research Conference (2024), Stanford University (2024), Australasian Society for Autism Research (2023)

and UQ Compassion Symposium (2023). Recently, we ran a workshop for 145 clinical psychologists at the APS Conference (2024).

4. Consumer's Contribution

Describe any contribution by Mental Health consumers/persons with lived experience other than as subjects e.g. reference group, researcher (195/200 words)

The ASPAA stands as a pioneering initiative where mental health consumers, specifically autistic adults, have played integral roles in the design and development of the program, beyond simple participation. Notably, one of the lead researchers and designers is an autistic adult who navigates personal challenges with anxiety and self-compassion, embedding authentic insight into the program's foundation. In its developmental phase, the ASPAA benefitted from the contributions of an autistic advisory group. Through individual interviews, this group—comprising individuals with varying levels of self-compassion—provided critical input on the program's content, wording, and exercises to ensure relevancy and accessibility for an autistic audience. Their invaluable feedback led to substantial refinements in ASPAA's content and structure. Further enhancing the program's consumer contribution, the advisory group members shared their personal journeys in self-compassion through recorded videos, greatly enriching the program's material. This initiative was expanded based on the feedback from 39 pilot participants, who expressed a strong appreciation for these lived experience narratives and desired more autism-specific content. Responding to this, pilot participants were invited to contribute their own videos, now featured in the final version of the ASPAA, showcasing a profound level of consumer involvement and co-production.

Eligibility Rules

	Dr Chris Edwards	Dr Ru Ying Cai
Experience	Less than 5 years research experience from PhD conferral in Dec 2019 (was not in a research role until Jan 2022 as listed on CV below).	5 years postdoctoral research experience from July 2019 (at 0.8FTE; Ru had a 6-month break after PhD conferral in Dec 2018, between January to June 2019, waiting for contracts to be finalised for an Autism CRC project on financial wellbeing, prior to her starting her Aspect job in July 2019).
Title & employment level	Previously Postdoctoral Researcher, currently Research Fellow/Adjunct Research Fellow	Previously Postdoctoral Researcher, currently Research Fellow/Adjunct Research Fellow
Conference Availability	Yes	Yes
Previous Winner	No	No

Brief Curriculum Vitae (Dr Chris Edwards)

Qualifications

Year	Award	Institution
Dec 2019	Doctor of Philosophy	Queensland University of Technology (QUT)
Dec 2015	Bachelor of Behavioural Science (Honours in Psychology)	QUT
July 2014	Bachelor of Behavioural Science (Psychology)	QUT
July 2014	Bachelor of Business (Management)	QUT

Career highlights and summary

- Over $2,500,000 awarded in tenders, grants and proposals from the Department of Health and Primary Health Networks (the majority was awarded during my time with AGPAL Group of Companies as a Project and Tender Officer)
- 2023 Keynote Speaker at the Australasian Society for Autism Research (ASfAR) Conference
- 2023 Invited Speaker at the Euregionaal Congresburo – Annual Congress - Autism
- 2023 Award for Achievement in Autism Research (Translation) from Autism CRC with Dr Ru Ying Cai
- 2023 Individual Achievement Award from Autism Queensland
- 2022 Margot Prior Award from ASfAR ($2,500)

Current appointments	
Mar 2024 - Present (1.0 FTE)	Research Fellow - Aspect Research Centre for Autism Practice (ARCAP), Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect)
Dec 2023 - Present	Non-Executive Director - Empower Autism
Dec 2022 - Present	Executive Committee Member - ASfAR
Sept 2022 - Present	Adjunct Research Fellow - Menzies Health Institute Queensland, Griffith University. A member of the Inclusive Futures Reimagining Disability beacon and an external PhD supervisor.

Previous appointments (after PhD)	
Jan 2022 - Oct 2022 (0.6 FTE) Nov 2022 - Mar 2024 (1.0 FTE)	Postdoctoral Researcher – ARCAP, Aspect
Feb 2022 - Oct 2022 (0.4 FTE)	Positive Behaviour Support Practitioner, Aspect
July 2022 - Aug 2023	Research Advisory Panel Member – Autism at ACU, Australian Catholic University
June 2021 - Jan 2022 (1.0 FTE)	National Quality Manager – Positive Behaviour Support - ORS Group
Sept 2020 - June 2021 (1.0 FTE)	Senior Positive Behaviour Support Practitioner - ORS Group
June 2019 - Sept 2020 (1.0 FTE)	Project and Tender Officer – AGPAL Group of Companies

Research Activity

14 peer reviewed publications (including those under review). Exemplars include:

- Cai, R. Y., **Edwards, C**., Love, A. M. A., Brown, L., & Gibbs, V. (2024). Self-compassion improves emotion regulation and mental health outcomes: A pilot study of an online self-compassion program for autistic adults. *Autism.* Advance online publication.
- **Edwards, C**., Tutton, T., & Gibbs, V. (2024). Organized physical activity participation among autistic Australians: barriers, enablers and implications for inclusion. *Neurodiversity.* Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/27546330241240648
- **Edwards, C**., Gibbs, V., Love, A. M. A., Brown, L., & Cai, R. Y. (2024). A qualitative exploration of an autism specific self-compassion program: The ASPAA. *Autism.* Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613241234097
- **Edwards, C**., Love, A. M. A., Jones, S. C., Cai, R. Y., Nguyen, B. T. H., & Gibbs, V. (2023). “Most people have no idea what autism is”: Unpacking autism disclosure using social media analysis. *Autism.* Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613231192133

One book chapter:

- **Edwards, C**., & Saggers, B. (2021). Developing communities of practice for educator professional learning: Developing connections in rural and remote regions. In *Research Approaches to Supporting Students on the Autism Spectrum in Inclusive Schools* (pp. 102-118). Routledge.

Scholarly Outreach

- 12 presentations at national and international conferences, such as ASfAR and Euroregionaal Congresburo.
- Five community webinars for organisations such as Reframing Autism, Stanford University and Aspect.
- Research that has been featured in media such as ABC and The Conversation.

Brief Curriculum Vitae (Dr Ru Ying Cai)

PERSONAL STATEMENT

I am a Research Fellow at the Aspect Research Centre for Autism Practice (ARCAP), Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect). I am passionate about understanding and researching the person-specific and environmental factors that promote mental health and resilience in autistic individuals and their parents/caregivers and translating the research knowledge into practical programs to improve the lives of autistic people and their caregivers. I have extensive expertise and experience in utilising surveys, interviews, focus groups, experience sampling, and heart rate variability methods and applying various advanced statistical approaches relevant to the current proposal. My PhD thesis examined the relationships between emotion regulation, intolerance of uncertainty, and mental health and well-being in youth and adults on the spectrum. Currently, I am leading a program of work at ARCAP that aims to explore the self-compassion experiences of autistic adults, focusing on how these experiences relate to emotion regulation, mental health, and well-being and determining if interventions that increase levels of self-compassion may improve mental health. I have co-produced a self-guided online self-compassion program with Dr Chris Edwards to help autistic adults build their self-compassion levels. We are evaluating the feasibility and efficacy of this program. Preliminary results indicate significant group improvements in self-reported self-compassion scores from pre- to post-intervention.

I have managed research projects (from design to dissemination of findings) on a wide range of topics, including tertiary education, financial well-being, and self-compassion, and presented the conclusions of these studies at conferences (5 first-authored orals, nine first-authored posters, 21 co-authored orals and posters), as well as published 40 journal articles (including 16 first-author, four last-author) and four book chapters. I have obtained seed funding ($50,000) from the Australian New Zealand Bank to examine the financial well-being of adults on the spectrum (two papers published). To be more actively involved in the local autism community, I am currently volunteering as Board Chair at Different Journeys. Before starting my career in psychology research, I worked at General Electric as an IT project manager and IT auditor.

RELEVANT EDUCATION

2014 – 2018 La Trobe University: Doctor of Philosophy (Psychology)

RECENT EMPLOYMENT HISTORY

03/2024 – Present Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect), Research Fellow

07/2019 – 03/2024 Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect), Postdoctoral Researcher

12/2020 – 03/2023 Monash University, Online Instructor

07/2019 – 08/2020 Macquarie University, Postdoctoral Research Fellow

05/2017 – 12/2018	Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism (Autism CRC) & RMIT University, Research Officer
09/2013 – 12/2018	La Trobe University, Research Officer & Tutor
06/2016 – 11/2018	Swinburne University and Non-affiliated, Tutor and Student Mentor
01/2013 – 08/2013	University of Melbourne, Project Manager/Evaluator
02/2011 – 12/2012	Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre, La Trobe University, Senior Research Assistant

HONOURS & AWARD

2023	Award for Achievement in Autism Research (Translation) from Autism CRC with Dr Chris Edwards
2020	Funding ($50,000) from ANZ Bank for the financial well-being project
2014 – 2017	Autism CRC scholarship for postgraduate studies
2015	Travel Grant Award for the Regional IMFAR Shanghai

SCHOLARLY PUBLICATIONS

Please see my Google Scholar for the list of peer-reviewed publications: https://scholar.google.com.au/citations?user=rsDCzscAAAAJ&hl=en

EDITORIAL SERVICES

Special Issues Editor for *Frontiers in Psychiatry*. Ad hoc reviewer for the following journals: *Frontiers in Neuroscience, Current Psychology, Cognition and Emotion, Journal of Psychophysiology, Autism Research, Autism, Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, Journal of Developmental Disabilities, Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders, Research in Developmental Disabilities, Autism in Adulthood,* and *Advances in Neurodevelopmental Disorders.*

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

10/2020 – Present	Different Journeys, Volunteer Board Chair

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I am writing to offer my enthusiastic support for the application of Dr Ru Ying Cai and Dr Chris Edwards for the MHS Early Career Researcher Award. Having closely collaborated with both Dr Cai and Dr Edwards on various research initiatives, I can attest to their exceptional research skills, dedication, and commitment to improving the lives of autistic individuals.

Both Dr Edwards and Dr Cai exhibit a passion for advancing research in the field of autism and have consistently demonstrated their competence across all stages of research design and delivery. Their innovative approaches to investigating autism including utilizing novel methodologies such as experience sampling and social media analysis and consistently incorporating participatory approaches have led to important findings across a range of areas including mental health, financial wellbeing, disclosure experiences and community inclusion and participation.

One of the most notable qualities of both Dr Edwards and Dr Cai is their unwavering dedication to translating research findings into tangible practices that positively influence the lives of autistic individuals. Through their collaborative efforts, they have effectively bridged the gap between academia and practical application, resulting in interventions and strategies that have significantly improved the well-being and quality of life for autistic people, most notable the ASPAA program which is the first self- compassion program developed with and for autistic people.

Furthermore, their impressive publication record speaks volumes about their scholarly contributions and the significance of their research endeavors. Their work has not only contributed to the academic discourse but has also garnered attention from practitioners and other researchers keen to collaborate and hear more about their work, further amplifying the reach and impact of their findings.

In summary, Dr Edwards and Dr Cai exemplify the qualities of emerging leaders in autism research. Their passion, competence, and dedication to translating research into practice have positioned them as invaluable assets to the field. I wholeheartedly endorse their application for the Early Career Researcher Award and have no doubt that they will continue to make significant contributions to the advancement of autism research and the betterment of autistic individuals' lives. Since commencing as Research Fellows at Autism Spectrum Australia, Ru and Chris have conducted research focused on how to better support good mental health and wellbeing for autistic people including improving disclosure experiences, increasing understanding about the barriers and facilitators to physical activity and developing self-compassion.

Regards,

Dr Vicki Gibbs
Head of Research
Aspect Research Centre for Autism Practice

Additional Referee

Name: Dr Abigail Love

Role: Research Fellow, Autism Spectrum Australia

Supporting Material

Accessing ASPAA:

The free autistic adult version of the ASPAA can be accessed from this website: https://www.aspect.org.au/about-autism/our-research/aspaa

The clinician version of the ASPAA can be purchased from this website: https://shop.aspect.org.au/products/aspect-self-compassion-program-for-autistic-adults-aspaa

Autistic experiences of ASPAA:

A few of our pilot participants have described the benefits of completing the program in these short videos which have been included in the current version:

Gene (he/him): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=atGh7kQRjXw

Emma (she/her): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YX8r6BDQLV0

Su (she/her): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1sRIraI2_Rg

Autism CRC Award:

The Autism-Specific Self-Compassion Program (ASPAA) has been honoured with the prestigious 2023 Autism CRC Award for Achievement in Autism Research, specifically recognised for its exceptional contribution to translating autism research into practical application. This accolade is particularly significant as the Autism CRC is renowned as the independent national authority for evidence-based best practices in autism in Australia, underscoring the importance and impact of the ASPAA's contributions to the field: https://www.autismcrc.com.au/news/latest-news/autism-crc-research-awards-announced-asfar.

