Eloping: Autism & Community-Driven Research

with Nicole Corrado, Sandra Nakata, Tina Wilson (UBC School of Social Work) & Meg Gibson (University of Waterloo)

[Intro Theme Music]

Dr. Barbara Lee **0:00**

I am Dr. Barbara Lee, the Knowledge Exchange Mobilization Scholar for the University of British Columbia School of Social Work. This is the Knowledge Exchange, a Partnership and action podcast highlighting community-engaged partnerships within and outside the University of British Columbia School of Social Work, which is situated on the traditional, ancestral and unseated territories of the Musqueam people.

In this episode, Nicole Corrado, Sandra Nakata, Tina Wilson and Meg Gibson discuss their community led research project that explores autistic people's perspectives and experiences of elopement, which is when autistic individuals depart suddenly from supervised settings and relationships without permission or notice.

Rooted in lived experience and informed by a participatory action research approach, the project explores the potential that partnership offers in transforming current practices of policing autistic people's behaviors, and encouraging belonging through understanding. Together, the team shares how the project emerged from community needs, reflects on the harms of epistemic injustice, and explores how rethinking social norms can better support autistic individuals' safety and autonomy.

The conversation invites listeners into insights in the experiences of elopement and share hopes for the future on their community research partnership.

So let's get started. I'm gonna turn it over to your team to introduce yourselves.

Meg Gibson **1:32**

Nicole, would you like to introduce yourself first?

Nicole Corrado **1:36**

Hi, I'm Nicole Corrado and I decided to create this project because I had lived experience with elopement and I noticed that there was absolutely no research asking autistic people why they eloped. And I wondered why I as an autistic person was engaging with that behavior and I wanted to let other people know that the behavior does have a purpose and I wanted to be able to help find out why people might elope so that I could help people elope, but do it safely so that it doesn't worry their families and it doesn't harm them. And that way the elopement can be used as a coping strategy to help improve the person's quality of life because just removing it, doesn't look at why it might be happening.

Meg Gibson **2:29**

That's awesome. Sandra, do you want to introduce yourself a bit?

Sandra Nakata **2:33**
My name is Sandra Nakata. I am recently retired after 25 years in the federal government. I'm also a late diagnosed autistic person. I was diagnosed at the age of 37, and I am involved in this research as a participant because I think this research is very valuable. And, it's very empowering for me as an autistic person to have this voice.

Meg Gibson **2:55**
Awesome. Tina, would you like to introduce yourself?

Tina Wilson **2:58**
Sure. Uh, my name is Tina Wilson and I'm an assistant professor in the School of Social Work at the University of British Columbia. I am one of the co-investigators on this project. My general research interests are around the ways in which social movements and lived experience movements interact with formal, scientific or expert knowledge, in that interaction, change how welfare systems and helping professions do their work. So that's, that's super exciting stuff that I think is really cool and, autism, is absolutely sort of at the top of the list in terms of an incredibly, incredibly active and incredibly, expressive, group of folks, that are, sort of moving, moving mountains in a lot of ways, actually, to challenge and change scientific and expert knowledge. So, it's just really, really cool.

Meg Gibson **3:41**
And I'm Meg Gibson. I'm a, an associate professor at Renison University College at the University of Waterloo and I'm a researcher who focuses on neurodiversity and critical disability, among other things. So, I am the PI on this project. So, the principal investigator on the project, which was funded by SSHRC through an insight grant and also through a preceding grant. I'm also a social worker and I've worked with families and lots of contexts, and I'm also a parent, to two people, one of whom is autistic and who has left places for various reasons and, you know, sometimes cause some concern to other people as a result. And so, I'm the person that Nicole approached to work with her and with the community on this project.

Dr. Barbara Lee **4:32**
So, if you could share with the audience around this project and this work that you're undergoing and, how you have all come together.

Meg Gibson **4:41**
So, as Nicole mentioned, this project started because she came and Nicole just told me that I should do this research, basically. Nicole, do you want to say more about why you approached me or why you felt like it was important to do something different.

Nicole Corrado **4:57**

Well, I wondered why I had engaged in this behavior myself and I noticed that police were really misrepresenting both me and other missing persons who are autistic in the missing person bulletins, and I wondered if there was any research into autism and elopements. Seeing that there was none, I created a Survey Monkey survey that got 25 participants, and it got some really interesting answers back. And noticing that it got some interesting answers, I wondered if any professors would actually create a more professional survey that would have academic value.
So, I searched around, shopped around, found Meg Gibson and realized she'd be interested in the project. So, in—I think it was 2020 or 2021 that the project started.

Meg Gibson **5:48**
Yeah. And so then we had a couple of conversations, and honestly, I didn't know the term eloping until Nicole came and talked to me about it. Um, and it's still a term that's a little, you know, difficult because a lot of people, who are autistic and a lot of people who are not autistic just hear the term eloping and think that we're talking about people getting marriage married without, you know, formal approval of parents or something like that. Right. So it's, it's a tricky term. But I was actually familiar with what Nicole was describing as a sort of behavior of leaving places often suddenly often in ways that people were concerned about and I was really interested in, the kinds of things she was saying about the problems that come up with police, the problems that come up with, schools. And since I have been doing other research with autistic community and neurodivergent communities, more generally, I thought, well, if nobody else is doing this and there's a need, you know, I think that's something I'd like to take on. So I was really grateful to Nicole for starting those conversations.

And then we talked about what kind of role she would like to have and how the project should go, and we decided that a participatory action research approach would be most appropriate because it was an idea from community members. It wouldn't really make sense for me to suddenly say, okay, I got it from here. And I'm just going to come up with ideas of what needs to happen. It wasn't my idea in the first place. It's also not research that's going to affect me the most. It's going to affect the community the most. So, Nicole also wanted to continue to be involved, but I remember you saying at one point, Nicole, you're like, I want to be involved. I don't need to be on the grant, you know, but I'd like to still be part of the conversations and be on presentations and things. And I thought, yeah, PAR, or participatory action research, is a really good way of doing that.

So, we worked on a survey together with initially three other co-researchers, and that was great. That was really, really interesting because survey design is not something that is always done in a participatory way, and actually we, we changed and challenged a lot of the usual practices in surveys, I would say, within that team, and we created what we thought was a pilot survey to distribute online.

We thought, okay, well, we'll try it out and see if it works. But we ended up getting a huge response. So, we heard from 195 people who were all identified as autistic, or as a person with autism or, you know, like any of the various labels that people feel comfortable with or not comfortable with. And then they also had some sort of lived experience related to leaving places.

And that could include running away, that could include, you know, going missing or getting lost that could include some I was feeling like they just really needed to move even if they were in a classroom or a workspace where they weren't supposed to. And so that was a really huge response.

We had very minimal funding at that stage. So, we didn't, we weren't even giving honoraria to people to fill out this rather long survey, but to me, that showed that the survey that Nicole and the other co-researchers had come up with was really speaking to the community and really meeting a need. So, then we got further funding, and we were able to bring on other people.
So, we were able to bring on Tina and other co-investigators on that, larger grant. And then we were able to bring on other co-researchers such as Sandra. So yeah, we all kind of came together at different stages. I wonder if, um, Sandra, if you'd want to talk about why you joined.

Sandra Nakata **9:26**
I joined up with the study because I saw the request for participants. And at first, I did think it was about people who get married without telling anybody. So I ignored it at first but then I thought, you know, I've been living common law with my partner because I dread the idea of a wedding so maybe I'll check it out and it turned out to not even be about that, but it still pertains to me anyway.

But I appreciate the study because, as has been pointed out, it does touch on an area that so many people have experienced, but there's been no actual conversation about it. About why this happens and what can we do to make this safer for you or for the people who care about you. So, I think that it's really important in that sense.
I also think it's really important because it engages the autistic community, which is something that we haven't seen a lot of. When I was first diagnosed, nobody wanted to hear my lived experiences except to diagnose me. But people weren't studying our lived experiences and taking them as a valid body of information. We were being told by academics and doctors what the autistic lived experience was. And I think that led to a lot of isolation.

This sort of project, it brings people together, even if it's just, you know, one at a time coming in and talking to the researchers, it helps us connect to people who see our value, and who, who understand the importance of what we experience. And that's such a different reaction than I've gotten in other spaces, such as the workplace or the school environment. So. I do really appreciate that the researchers bring that aspect to the autistic community.

Meg Gibson **11:02**
Thanks, Sandra. And I should mention that after we did the survey and we brought more people on, and we got more funding, that's when we started doing interviews as well. So, we've also done 20 interviews at this point, and we have other plans. Tina, I was wondering if you wanted to talk about you're coming on and why you were doing that.

Tina Wilson **11:22**
I think we were chatting and you're like, oh, and then—

Meg Gibson **11:24**
Yeah, I think that's how it went.

Tina Wilson **11:25**
More generally, I would say, that, uh, as somebody who is a long time social worker, community worker, and now is responsible for teaching and social work and saying something useful in writing and social work, that, that like one of the biggest, uh, I guess, tensions in social service work, helping professions, welfare state kind of stuff, is the potential for, uh, it's called, there's different language for it, but like, interpretive violence. Sometimes these days it's epistemic injustice and there's different ways of it, but it just, like what happens to people when they are like profoundly misrecognized and misunderstood, and how that sort of affects people's lives, like really micro, interactions, their capacity to move in the world, and the ways in which the world reacts to them.

And so, I had never heard of the term eloping before, and I was like, what the hell is that? Like just the weirdest way of talking about people expressing themselves. So, anyway, so I thought it was just that the idea was really, just because the language is so bizarre. and then what it's supposed to represent and how it gets taken up by parents and particularly cops. Yeah, anyway, it just, seemed like it marked a potential for violence and a potential for a really aggressive reaction to, to people who are expressing themselves. And so, I actually just wanted to learn more, about it. So when Meg was like, 'Hey, I'm doing this project', I was like, that's really cool. Um, that's really important. So anyway, just, yeah, just in terms of, and especially just sort of extended family and, uh, with, kids who have the autism diagnosis, and, and their fear, their fear for their kids and stuff like that.

So it just seemed like it was a really fraught. yeah, especially the sort of the cross between racialization and elopment, in particular, for those family members, just like absolutely terrified for their male teenage children, if the cops react badly to them and stuff like that. So, anyway, it just, it seemed to sort of land on a point in, in time where, a lot of stuff is, increasingly pressured. so it just, yeah, really timely, really timely project, I think.

Dr. Barbara Lee **13:07**
We've mentioned a bit about, um, this new terminology or whether or not it's new of elopement. And I'm, I'm curious, a little bit of historical context of where and how it came about?

Meg Gibson **13:19**
I don't have a solid history on it, but I have seen where it comes up in research searches. And it seems to me, Nicole, I think you've done more looking into this honestly than I have, but it does seem to me that the psychology literature and the education literature are the places where I see the term most commonly coming up, and then sometimes, you know, in discussions around police, and sort of community safety concerns. This is the language that you hear in those spaces. I don't usually hear it coming from, that more lived experience perspective, but I know as Nicole was saying, some people do use this language for their own experience.

So it's, it's not like there is an alternative term that everybody's agreed on, so even in labeling the project, we are aware that there are people who say, I don't like that term. And then there are other people who say, I identify with that term, and then in asking people why they do these things that, you know, are sometimes called eloping, there's just a really wide range of responses.

So maybe it's not a single term that we need, right, due to people are sometimes really excited and going towards something, that seems different to me than if they're really afraid and running away from something. Like should we have the same word for those two things, you know? But it might look the same to other people if you don't ask. You don't actually try to understand what the person's experience is. So, Nicole, I wonder if you have any other thoughts on this, this history of this word or the meaning of this word for you.

Nicole Corrado **14:57**
I just looked up the word now I didn't know where it came from but now I do it's an Anglo Norman French word, 'alope', it means to leap or run away. The term elope has evolved over time, but it's always had a connection to running away, getting married, or also it can refer to when somebody who's autistic runs away or escapes without permission. Not that we necessarily need permission when we're adults, I mean, but anyway. Yeah, I noticed all kinds, of things right now I'm looking up on the internet and I find videos, "four ways to stop your kid from running away". "Why kids run away a little bit in autistic children". Probably nobody asked the kids. It's all about kids, it assumes that adults never would. And it just tries to stop it, it doesn't look at why is it happening.

I was homeschooled before because I was homeschooled all my life, actually, all my high school years, and that was because when I was four years old, I would wander off because the school was too loud. So, I would wander off into the library. It annoyed the teachers. It annoyed everybody. They didn't know where I was. I knew where I was. I was teaching myself in the library because I couldn't learn with a bunch of other kids running around and making noise. So, I eloped into the library. And taught myself because I was hyperlexic, I found somewhere quiet to learn because I found a way to teach myself in a way that made sense for me. And nobody would have assumed that a four-year-old would have that kind of insight, but yes. So, if you take away elopements, you're going to end up with meltdowns. You're going to end up with the kid having accidents. You're going to end up with a lot more "problem behaviors" because you've taken away the coping.

Meg Gibson **16:41**
Yeah, and that, that came through really loud and clear across all the surveys and the interviews as well. That like, if the existing scientific or research literature was really focused on preventing eloping or, you know, stopping it or treating it only as a source of danger, they were missing out on all of the reasons people are actually leaving places and the ways that it could be helpful. And when we were asking people if they usually felt better or worse after they left places, I mean, maybe not surprisingly, they usually feel better, right? They're leaving because because it will serve some sort of purpose for them, I think. They will feel better if they have, uh, left a situation that has been really loud or really upsetting or really overwhelming or embarrassing or threatening. Or they might feel better because they get to go someplace that they really, really love. Um, and often that might be someplace in nature or it might be, towards an activity that they prefer. And to

me, this really highlights that, we often expect people other than ourselves to stay in really uncomfortable situations or unpleasant situations because it's convenient for the way we've set up our institutions, right?

So, with the way we set up our schools, it's hard if there's a kid who needs a different environment. We actually usually haven't set things up well for that. but some people have been able to arrange things with the school. Like you were talking about Nicole, you know, being able to go to the library or having a certain place, in the hallway where the teacher knows, okay, when they're overwhelmed, that's where they're going to be. But that's a really different response.

The other thing that I've also heard about schools is sometimes if a kid leaves the school, they have an automatic policy of calling police. So, that raises the stakes for everybody quite hugely. Right. and we really wanted to learn more so that we can kind of prevent that, that sort of response that causes more danger, so that's where the response to eloping causes the danger that people say eloping causes, right? So, yeah, it's, uh, layered because people are leaving places for lots of different reasons, and have lots of different responses to them. But at the center for me is this need to understand, you know, why do people, need to leave places and also how can we support each other in being in, you know, safe and comfortable environments as much as possible, you know, and trusting people's gut on that.

Nicole Corrado **19:12**
What we need to doing is teaching safe elopement. It's like abstinence training never works for sex, as a replacement for sex ed, it just will not work because people will have sex. You can't stop people from having sex. You need to teach sex education and safe and healthy sex and healthy relationships. We need to be teaching safe elopement. You can't be saying you can't have elopement. It's a necessary behavior. So you need to be saying, well, how can you elope safely?

One of the things instead of giving tracking devices, which I think are quite frankly abusive, I would suggest giving cell phones, which you can track, but it's certainly has the advantage of doubling as an augmented and alternative communication device (AAC). Another thing you could do is give an iPad, which could be converted into an iPhone so that the person can communicate back and forth with a trusted person, and they could also just use it as an AAC device without using it as a phone, or with using it as a phone.

Meg Gibson **20:19**
Thank you. That also highlights how often, if nobody is assuming that autistic people have ideas about where they need to be, they might not even figure out if the problem relates to communication. Right? That it's not so much that people have no reason for doing a thing, but they haven't found a way to ask them, and wait and support an answer that makes sense, for that individual.

Nicole Corrado **20:45**
One thing we used to have was the block parents, if anybody's old enough to remember the block parent program. I do not know why anybody got rid of that. It enabled safe elopement because if a

person left a situation, like say if a child left a school because they were being bullied, they'd have a safe place to go. If there was abuse or neglect or disagreements at home they had a safe place to go. I think we should bring the block parent program back but have an autism safe space that a person could go to could have a symbol that autistic people could be taught to go to one of those places.

Meg Gibson **21:25**
Yeah, I mean, one of the things that's also really come up from the research is that this is not, a specialist topic, right?

I think if you look at the existing research literature, or even if you look at newspapers, you might get the idea that If an autistic person might leave places, we're talking about, involving teachers, we're talking about involving psychologists, we're talking about involving social workers, we're talking about involving police. There's very little about like, this as a sort of, maybe as a community, we can all take care of each other, respond to each other and be supportive. But if you actually talk to people about their own experiences of leaving places, very commonly, they're actually finding the most support from people they just meet in the community from so called strangers, right?

So, we have this whole language of strangers being dangerous. And of course, you know, we can't necessarily know what every encounter will be like with somebody we don't know, but the actual stories that we're hearing, are, are of people finding strangers, to be really supportive and helpful. So that suggests that maybe all of us need to be thinking about how we respond to each other or respond to people of any age who seem to be distressed or seem to be maybe lost or seem to be maybe confused.

Nicole Corrado **22:50**
I would also mention that one of the biggest problems with the literature only being about children is that if an adult elopes, there's the erroneous idea that that adult must be mentally a child. We get into the huge problem of mental age theory. I noticed recently there was an Inuk woman in Montreal who was 21, was what was described as being mentally seven. That's just completely and utterly inappropriate. This 21-year-old woman is not in a grade two class. But when they see the elopement behavior and all the literature is about seven-year-olds, and they see a 21-year-old woman, adult woman, mentally and physically adult, engages in that behavior, they assume, 'Oh, she must be mentally seven'. And it's really horrible because your full name was posted online, with this terrible description. And all I could think about is what's that going to do to employers? What's that going to do to colleges and university applications? What's that going to do to any potential renting, any potential home buying, any potential future partners?

It's just, she was found thankfully the next day, but she was physically found, but part of her is still missing because of that terrible, terrible missing person's bulletin that was put out.
And it's quite frankly, incredibly racist to call an Inuk woman mentally seven, because if you look at the history of the residential schools and you look at the history of forced sterilization, you realize just how harmful that kind of mindset is.

Meg Gibson **24:27**
Absolutely. I wonder if Sandra if you wanted to talk any more about what you have thought about or learned, you know, during this project or if you have any other sort of comments about what is really important for other people to understand.

Sandra Nakata **24:45**
Um, I think one thing that goes hand in hand with the findings of this research and, and similar research is realizing that we have to change a lot of things in the way we deal with people with autism. We have to not only try harder to understand what's going through their minds, but we have to take their words at face value.

So, if somebody has a history of say, departing from somewhere, because the environment's too much for them. They've got sensory perception issues, for example. It doesn't help to find them and try to convince them to endure the environment saying, you know, 'Oh, your, your colleagues don't have problems with these lights' or, 'This machine doesn't really make that much noise. You got to get over it'. We have to update not just our understanding of autistic people, but the way we interact with them in the words we choose to interact with them, because that's also part of what makes people feel that they're not being heard.

So, if I continually run away from my desk because there's fluorescent lights buzzing overhead and you know, I can't stand it for more than an hour at a time to have somebody say, you know, we can't change that for you because we can't show favoritism. That tells me that they totally don't understand what the problem is. So, if we're going to make this effort of understanding why people are behaving the way they are. We have to be prepared to act on that. We have to be able to think of ways to accommodate them so that they don't feel like they have to run away. Even if it's saying, you know, you can go away for a few minutes and just take your time coming back.
Maybe we can deal with this once you've settled down or once you feel a little bit better, that would be a huge accomplishment, I think, in the workplace or in the, in the school room.

Meg Gibson **26:26**
Thank you. I'm also, I was really surprised, but maybe not surprised as much, but you know, I was struck by how many people also talked about social settings and social pressures as at the core of, their experiences of wanting to leave places, but then feeling really punished if they did or feeling like they couldn't because they would get in so much trouble with people who were ostensibly their family and friends often, if they actually left places like parties, weddings, dances, you know, even workplace socials, trying to navigate these spaces that are supposed to be "fun" could produce a huge amount of anxiety and also self-blame and also blamed by others. That could be labeled as you know for your own good as well. So, yeah, I guess I was wondering if anybody had anything else to add about that it certainly made me think about how we do social gatherings, more broadly, right.

Tina Wilson **27:25**
Yeah.

Nicole Corrado **27:26**
I would give an example recent example of where elopement type behavior actually had a positive social outcome.

I was recently at a Vegan Cube of Truth event. These are events where vegan activists will wear an animal mask or another type of mask, and they will show videos of mistreatment of animals at farms. And we'll hand out pamphlets about going vegan and animal rights is one of my big special interests. Another one of my special interests is religion and theology. And I noticed that there is a Muslim evangelist was handing out literature. So, I eloped over to him and started talking to him about religion and animal rights. And it turned out that this guy was interested in becoming vegan, but he didn't know how to eat a healthy vegan diet on a budget. So, some of the other activists, I brought them over and they talked to him and gave him some literature on how he could get healthy vegan food on a budget, and it was really helpful to him. Um, and helpful to the vegan group, it was, it was interesting, my two special interests, I saw one special interest in that my ADHD part of the autism, it's like runs over to the other special interest and then I end up combining them in a way that they would never occurred to them.

Meg Gibson **28:54**
Yeah. I mean it really highlights the ways that public space can be really important, and meaningful and not just like a place you go through and on the way to something else. Right? Even though a lot of the discourse about autistic people in public spaces seems to be really fear based, right? That's a sort of danger, you know, don't talk to people you don't know. Don't go places, right? Tina, I'm wondering if you have other thoughts to add at this point?

Tina Wilson **29:22**
Yeah, just, uh, just the pieces that folks are talking about, uh, it's making me think of, the sort of the rise in risk thinking for especially for young people in schools and police and those sorts of things. And then what Meg was just talking about in terms of looser forms of sociality where you can make alternative connections if you actually bother to just talk to strangers. So, that just this kind of the, the goofiness around stranger danger, the amplification of kind of stranger danger discourse versus like what happens when you just like start chatting up somebody on the street corner and you can have really cool shit happen. So I do, and I think, yeah, anyway, so I wonder if there's something around, the rise of elopement as a way of framing, uh, young people's behavior in schools or whatever, and the rise in risk discourse around young people and, particularly around sort of the 1980s stranger danger in North America, versus other, uh, spaces where young people can actually talk to adults and it's not weird.

Anyway, just I just, this is totally random but I will go on an associative tangent, but I was born and raised in Toronto and then as an adult, I moved to Hamilton, which is a smaller post-industrial steel town that's next to Toronto. And in Toronto just born and raised downtown Toronto, like you just take the bus, you know, like, so there's like lots of rules about how you negotiate Toronto on public transit when you're like 12 or whatever. So, you know, you have like your address written

down and then you have like an extra bus ticket and you have a quarter to call your parents if you get lost or like, these are like the very, like when you're 12 when you're on, you know, TTC in Toronto.

Anyway, so then when I moved to Hamilton, and I just like take a walk in the park by my house or something, I'm like, again, like random small children would just run up to me and start chatting and I was like; I'm going to get arrested. Don't talk to me. So, there is a thing about like, depending on, I think the size of the city or the size of the community that we're in, that there's different kinds of social norms around. So, I grew up on a main street, like main street like I didn't know my neighbours, I didn't know those kinds of things. So, I definitely got the sort of stranger danger version of, uh, of negotiating the world and then moving to somewhere where, uh, where kids are just like, yeah, I know you're an adult, I get to talk to you cause you're like, just you're just, you're just part of the scenery. You're just part of the neighborhood and I can call on you if I need things from you. And then my reaction of just like, are you allowed to talk to me? Why are you talking to me kid? Anyway, so just, yeah, just really different. I think I can imagine that there's really different community norms, depending on where you live as well. So, that was a big learning for me.

Meg Gibson **31:32**
Yeah, and even within the city, I mean, I also live in Toronto and I've raised my kids there and a lot of how my parenting has happened has also benefited from knowing neighbors and having people sort of say, 'Oh yeah, I saw your kid doing like walking down the street' or whatever. I'm like, 'Oh, okay', it wasn't because I needed to know where they were all the time, but just sort of feeling like they are known and they are noticed, brought a different sense of, of safety to me as a parent that I didn't need to actually control where they went as much. Right?

At the same time, we were also hearing about a lot of problems that people experienced within families or with teachers or, you know, in the spaces that are supposed to be so-called safe. Right. So, um, the stranger danger narrative frames the house, the school, the private sphere as where you should feel safe and should feel yourself, you know, should feel like yourself and you can, you know, just relax. and that was not the experience that we were hearing about from a lot of people in this project. And so, people wanting to leave those spaces where there's a lot of family or a lot of, you know, social pressures because they knew people, often that's, that's public sphere felt a lot safer.

Sandra Nakata **32:48**
May I just, just based on what you're saying there, Meg, I just wanted to add something. I don't want to dwell on this, but I would say that the greatest harm that's come to me, as a result of my being Autistic has come from people who know me who mean well, but they don't understand.
So, maybe it's a teacher who says you're not trying hard enough. Maybe it's from an employer who says, 'Why can't you do what your colleagues do?' People who should know me well enough that they can see what my issues are. And I find that that kind of hurt is worse than anything a stranger could say to me, because these are people who have grown up with me or who have worked alongside me for years, who failed to recognize that I'm different from them in in what I need.

On the other hand, when I was first living on my own in downtown Toronto. I didn't know this was what I was doing, but it worked out that I made an acquaintance on pretty much every block around my apartment and little stores or, you know, a shopkeeper I would say good morning to or the lady who sold me samosas and and, and I knew them well enough that if I didn't see them, you know, on a regular basis, they would say, 'Oh, we missed you', or 'I was wondering when I'd see you'. And I think that sometimes there's an environment that grows up around us that we're not even aware of, but there are people there who are just regular people, they love their families they, you know, value their customers. They see you every day and they recognize you as a person who warrants, you know, their attention and their respect. And I love that kind of community.

Tina, I think you spoke briefly about about these lower-stake social interactions. And I love that. I love the way my favorite waitress at the breakfast place can say something, it'll just make my day and get me off to a great start. And, you know, it's not like if she said anything terrible to me, it would ruin my day. But it's just, it's an unexpected thing that someone's bestowed upon me that's just made my day a little better. And I love that.

Dr. Barbara Lee **34:44**
And just to kind of bring this towards an end, I'm wondering if each of you could share a bit about your vision of this work in terms of its impact and the work moving forward some next steps, perhaps.

Meg Gibson **35:00**
Yeah, well, I'm definitely in the midst of looking at the survey data analysis. And so we've done a research poster from that and we're writing that up. So, survey data analysis, we'll be writing up and also sharing back on the website and talking more with the co-researchers about what we want to do with the findings once we have them. So that's, you know, a bit to be determined. And then we have these beautiful interviews that people were so generous with, and I really am trying to clear a good amount of time and connect with enough people to sort of think very carefully about how we are going to work with those interviews. So I've been talking to Tina about this a bit.

I've, we'll be talking with the co-researcher team as well, as we do that. And then the grant also, we plan a photo voice, arts informed section of the research. So, that is something that we're going to be doing, but I want to make sure that we're, you know, getting back to the community on the work that we've already done sort of before we launch a new initiative, asking for people's time and energy and beautiful insights again. But that will be coming up.

Nicole Corrado **36:15**
My vision for this project is to provide a safe environment for autistic people where they can be themselves and express themselves and be able to do what they want to do and fulfill the best life they can fulfill without having other people try to mold them into a shape that they just will not fit.

I am much happier when I moved out on my own and I think that my drive for elopement, which is partly due to ADHD and partly due to autism, allowed me much more independence. That's allowed me, like Sandra was saying, to meet a lot of people, make a lot of connections, and has

allowed me to discover who I am. Because I see far too many autistic people who are still living at home, people who are minimal support like myself, and I often wonder if that's because maybe they've been told, 'oh, don't go here, don't go there, don't do this, don't do that', and perhaps there's a bit of learned helplessness with a lot of my autistic peers.

Sandra Nakata **37:25**
Um, I'm sort of minimally involved in this project, but I have been following it, the updates, and I hope that it's wildly successful because I think that this is, this is a great step towards a future where autistic people are heard and valued. Where our experiences matter and, where people don't think that we need to be treated like children.

There are some things definitely that I can use help with and, and I'm able to identify those things. Sometimes I need a little help identifying those things, but we, we are definitely capable people. And I look forward to seeing how, how the perception of autistic people changes, over the next many years.

Tina Wilson **38:10**
I'm looking forward to getting to actually read the interviews, since I didn't participate in gathering them. My suspicion is, is there's going to be massive amounts of really pragmatic, straightforward stuff in the interviews, and that that is going to be really useful for, for challenging existing ideas about what elopement is or how professionals should react to eloping.

So, I, I can just imagine actually just sort of the, the pragmatic voice of autistics; 'Like guys, it's just like this thing that I do, it just makes sense, like, why are you mystifying it? Why are you turning it into something that it's not like, it's just a thing, like, come on, figure it out.' So, I can, anyway, I can just, I can imagine that there's a good chance that that's, that's part of what will be in the interviews, and that that'll be really pragmatically useful for challenging existing practices in schools and with police.

Meg Gibson **38:58**
I'm just really grateful to everybody who's participated in this project, all the co-researchers, all the co-investigators and all of the community members who have like forwarded it and, you know, vetted it and given their feedback on it. Like it's, it's a lot of people who care about this and it's really amazing to be part of.

[Outro Theme Music]

Dr. Barbara Lee **39:20**
Thanks for listening to The Knowledge Exchange: A Partnership-in-Action Podcast! This podcast is a University of British Columbia Knowledge Exchange and Mobilization Scholars initiative funded by the UBC Office of the Vice-President Research and Innovation's Knowledge Exchange unit. I'm Dr. Barbara Lee, the Knowledge Exchange and Mobilization Scholar for the School of Social Work, podcast host, and executive producer. Michelle O'Kane is the podcast producer. Cathy Jiu, Qian Zhou and Maddie Cathcart are our producer and editors. Podcast cover was designed by Cathy Jiu.

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