**INVESTIGATING IMAGINATION IN ADULTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER WITH ART-BASED ASSESSMENTS**

**Olena Helen Darewych1 Nicky J. Newton,2 & Kevin Wayne Farrugie3**

**1Wilfrid Laurier University, 2Woodview Mental Health and Autism Services**

**Objectives:** Imagination is a cognitive construct that involves an individual’s ability to create mental images that are not present to their senses. Since symbolic representations in drawings are the visible external products of one’s internal mental images a number of studies have used projective drawing tasks to measure imagination in children with ASD. The primary objective of this drawing study was to investigate imagination in adults with ASD.

**Methods:** This mixed-methods convergent study with an interrater agreement and art-based element examined whether the Scribble Drawing, Bridge Drawing with Path (BDP), and Future Trip Drawing art-based assessments could be utilized as creative methods in evaluating imagination and symbolic development of drawings in adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The research questions for this study were: 1. Will adults with ASD depict and describe symbols in their drawings not present to their senses? and 2. Will adults with ASD generate more non-social (places and objects) than social (self and people) symbols in their drawings?

Fourteen (*N* = 14) adults (*M*age = 27.7 years) with medium- to high- functioning ASD participated in a single individual one hour study session during which they completed the three aforementioned imaginative drawings. Participants had a choice to complete their drawings with traditional art media or on a digital touchscreen device using an art-making software program.

**Results:** The study results showed that the three art-based assessments with supporting written and verbal narrative associations can be considered as effective creative methods to measure imagination and symbolic development in adults with ASD. Most of the participants envisioned, developed, and described more non-social symbols representing real places and objects from their external world than social symbols in their Scribble Drawing (79%; *n* = 11) and Future Trip Drawing (86%; *n* = 12). One compelling Scribble Drawing finding was that half of the participants’ scribble lines directly embodied symbols not present to their senses. This finding supports previous literature that certain individuals with ASD have detail-focused drawing styles. A noteworthy BDP finding was that participants’ BDP end points led to things that made their life feel meaningful (i.e., art program, theatre).

**Discussion/Conclusions:** The study findings support the idea that certain adults with ASD have unique imaginative, cognitive, and drawing abilities, and that their imagination may be restricted when projective drawing tasks include social content. The researchers’ call upon developmental service providers to implement creative arts programs for people with autism and other developmental disabilities in order to maintain their imaginative thinking and executive function skills.

**Correspondence:**

**Olena Darewych, PhD, RP, RCAT**

**Adjunct Faculty, Spiritual Care and Psychotherapy,**

**Waterloo Lutheran Seminary - Wilfrid Laurier University**

[**odarewych@wlu.ca**](mailto:odarewych@wlu.ca)

**Nicky J. Newton,** [**nnewton@wlu.ca**](mailto:nnewton@wlu.ca)**; Kevin Wayne Farrugie,** [**kevinfarrugie@gmail.com**](mailto:kevinfarrugie@gmail.com)