



BEST RESEARCH PROJECT: STIGMA AND MENTAL HEALTH IRELAND LABORATORY (SAMI)

History: Psychology at NCI

Founded in 1951 as a workers' college, National College of Ireland (NCI) has grown considerably over the past 71 years, responsive to a changing society and innovative in its pedagogic approach. NCI moved to its current IFSC campus in 2001 and now has the largest School of Computing in Ireland; a Centre for Education and Lifelong Learning (CELL) that both delivers programmes to education professionals and looks after the continuous professional development of NCI academics; and a School of Business that produces both highly sought-after employees and entrepreneurs.



In 2012, NCI welcomed its first intake of undergraduate Psychology students to an internationally-recognised honours degree programme, accredited by the PSI (Psychological Society of Ireland). Celebrating its tenth anniversary this academic year, Psychology at NCI has gone from strength to strength, with graduates pursuing a variety of paths, including moving onto postgrad and doctoral studies, focusing purely on research or themselves returning to academia now in a lecturing role.

NCI collaborates on Psychology research with many other HEIs internationally.

Founding of SAMI Lab

What do you think of when you hear the term mental health?

We all have different ideas and opinions about mental health but, how accurate are these ideas; do we have different attitudes towards different groups?

Discrimination of people based on their mental health can lead to problems for those individuals in employment, access to accommodation, access to healthcare, and even self-esteem. For some individuals, the emotional impact of stigma can be as great a source, if not an even greater source, of suffering than the illness itself.

The effects of stigma are particularly harmful for young people, who may be afraid of telling people about their problems and seeking help. To better understand mental health stigma in Ireland and across the world, NCI Psychology set up the Stigma and Mental Health Ireland Laboratory (SAMI). The mission is simple: removing barriers to mental health worldwide.

SAMI Team

SAMI is directed by three full-time academic staff in National College of Ireland, Dr. April Hargreaves, Dr. David Mothersill, and Dr. Gerard Loughnane, as well as four Research Assistants, all current or former full-time Psychology students with the College.



Dr David Mothersill ([Profile Link](#))

is Assistant Professor and Programme Director of Psychology at National College of Ireland. David was awarded a PhD in Neuroscience from the University of Dublin, Trinity College, in 2014 and went on to lecture in the University of Galway, where he co-developed the successful MSc Programme in Clinical Neuroscience in 2016. David's research uses a combination of behavioural and neuroimaging experiments to better understand mental health difficulties. This research has led to 39 peer-reviewed papers in top scientific journals including Nature (impact factor 49.96), and over €100,000 in grant funding from the Irish Research Council, Royal Irish Academy, and Esther Ireland. David's first app, [cTOM](#), a social cognition test for use in basic and clinical research, was released on the Apple App Store earlier this year.



Dr April Hargreaves ([Profile Link](#))

completed her doctorate in neuropsychology and genetics with Trinity College Dublin, where her research focused on the neuropsychological/ cognitive profile of schizophrenia risk variants identified in genome wide association studies. Further research investigated psychological therapies for psychosis, with a particular interest in remediation of cognitive deficits in schizophrenia, using cognitive remediation therapy. More recently, Dr Hargreaves led an investigation of the role of CoQ10 in cognition and fatigue for patients with Schizophrenia, and currently her research is focused on the stigmatisation of psychosis in Ireland and internationally. Dr Hargreaves has published widely in the field, including 34 peer reviewed research articles and two books as Editor; the first titled Co-EnzymeQ10: From Fact to Fiction and the second titled Schizophrenia: Triggers and Treatments.

Dr Hargreaves currently holds the position of Vice-Dean of Undergraduate studies and Associate Professor of Psychology in the School of Business at National College of Ireland, where she is also a member of Academic Council.



Dr Ger Loughnane ([Profile Link](#))

is Assistant Professor in Statistics on a number of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in the National College of Ireland. He holds a BA in Computer Science (University College Dublin), a HDip in Psychology (Trinity College Dublin) and a PhD in Neuroscience (Trinity College Dublin). He gained further academic experience as a postdoctoral researcher on human decision making in Monash University Melbourne, Trinity College Dublin and University College Dublin. Most recently, Ger had worked in United Healthcare/Optum as a Senior Data Scientist, applying state of the art machine learning techniques to actuarial data. Ger's current research focusses on human decision making, using behavioural and neuroimaging techniques to discover the neural substrates of how we integrate perceptual and value-based information to arrive at decisions. An adjacent goal of this research is to aid in the understanding, diagnosis and treatment of attentional disorders such as Unilateral Neglect. This has led to a number of insights on how the human brain performs these seemingly simple tasks. Ger has published these findings in several high-profile journals such as Current Biology, eLife, and the Journal of Neuroscience.

Research assistants



Gabriela Grasso



Hau Nguyen



E Qing Kee



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SAMI Pilot study: key findings

Published in the Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine in 2021, SAMI's pilot study was titled [Knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours towards schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and autism](#). This study examined mental health stigma in over 300 people across Ireland.

- people had more negative attitudes and behaviours towards schizophrenia compared to some other mental health conditions,
- participants with greater knowledge of a mental health condition showed more positive attitudes and behaviours,

Most participants felt they were not informed enough about mental health by the media. These results suggest that future policies and campaigns should target individual mental health conditions and focus on increasing knowledge to reduce stigma.

Continuing Research

SAMI's second study, published in the Journal of American College Health in 2022, examined [mental health in third-level students during the COVID-19 pandemic](#). Two further papers are currently under review.

Achievements to Date

- Building on SAMI's important pilot research, the lab won a prestigious award from Esther Ireland worth €8,000 to carry out stigma research in a population-representative sample of 1,000 adults in Ireland.
- To examine how mental health stigma differs around the world, SAMI is collaborating with The Carter Centre and The University of Pittsburgh to examine mental health stigma in a population-representative sample of 1,000 participants in Liberia,
- SAMI is collaborating with the National Institute of Gerontology and Geriatrics to examine mental health stigma in Romania.

Open Data

SAMI is working with National College of Ireland's School of Computing to make all its data freely available to other researchers around the world, so that other researchers may use the data generated by SAMI to conduct their own research and contribute to the overall mission of removing barriers to mental health worldwide.

Future Goals

SAMI is proud to collaborate with [Shine](#), who run the See Change [Green Ribbon](#) campaign, working to reduce stigma and discrimination against people with mental health difficulties; [Headline](#), Ireland's national programme for responsible reporting of mental health difficulties in the media; and [Jigsaw](#), the National Centre for Youth Mental Health.

Drawing from the pilot study, SAMI has just published a book chapter on attitudes to Autism in [Autism Spectrum Disorders - Recent Advances and New Perspectives](#) edited by Professor Marco Carotenuto.

Ultimately, it is hoped that this research will provide key data for the Irish Government to inform policies and campaigns targeting mental health stigma.



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Ireland