



Feature Story: Natasha Drobotenko

2021 a productive year for PhD student

By Queen's Psychology - Jan 26, 2022

The fall of 2021 was a productive time for **Natasha Drobotenko**, currently a first year PhD student in the Department of Psychology at Queen's.

In early September 2021, Natasha was named the inaugural recipient of the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Poster Award, from the Society for Research on Psychopathology (SRP). Her poster was based on her MSc work in Dr. Jeremy Stewart's Queen's Emotions and Risky Behaviour in Youth (QuERBY) lab in collaboration with Dr. Caroline Pukall and the Sexual Health Research Lab.

According to The Society for Research in Psychopathology, the purpose of the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Poster Award is to promote psychopathology research on EDI / cultural actors / discrimination / social justice, by recognizing the most outstanding poster presentation by a trainee at any level, at each year's annual meeting. The award has cash value (waived conference fee and membership for a year), and Natasha's work was highlighted at the SRP annual meeting at the end of September.

"This is truly a mammoth accomplishment," says Dr. Jeremy Stewart. "Natasha's work was chosen from 187 applications, most of which would be coming from students further along in their training, since these awards are open to post-docs and graduate students of all levels. The selection is based on the caliber of the submission. The important ideas and effort that Natasha brought to her MSc thesis – on which the abstract was based – clearly stood out to the selection committee!"

Natasha's work is part of a project funded through the Queen's Research Opportunities Fund – Research Leaders' Fund, (an operating grant awarded to the research group of Dr. Stewart and

Dr. Pukall), as well as a SSHRC Canadian Graduate Scholarship and Ontario Graduate Scholarship awarded to Natasha.

Natasha's research explores the impact of lifetime stress and non-suicidal self-injury on suicide ideation among transgender and non-binary individuals. Specifically, her work focuses on understanding the trajectory of one's current suicidal thoughts starting from early experience of childhood abuse while considering experiences of stress unique to trans and non-binary people.

"This opportunity to work with both Dr. Stewart and Dr. Pukall to address this gap was not only exciting but very necessary," Natasha recalls. "Although rates of suicidal thoughts and behaviours including attempts are very high in this group, not much research has been done to understand why exactly." As Natasha puts it, much of suicide research is informed by the perspectives of cisgender individuals – or individuals who identify with their sex assigned at birth.

"Imagine trying to navigate not only your own thoughts but the mental healthcare field, only to be given suggestions that aren't addressing your experiences or questions," Natasha says. "It's isolating and potentially damaging." For this reason, Natasha wanted to understand if what had been previously suggested by researchers was applicable to trans and non-binary people – if prior stress experienced in life and episodes of self-injury without the intention to die, contributed to thoughts of suicide in the same way as cisgender people.

Natasha considers the SRP award to be an excellent forum to highlight her research, and she feels that the research conducted in recognition of this award has shaped how she wants to approach future research.

"I am very happy to have our work highlighted at a conference with leading researchers in the field of psychopathology and more so, bringing a spotlight to this underrepresented population," Natasha explains. "My hope is that my work will inspire others to take a step back, and adopt an inclusive lens that considers several facets of diversity – to think about who our research is meant to serve at the end of the day."

Natasha credits both the QuERBY and Sexual Health Research labs for all their resources and support, specifically her co-authors, Geneva Mason and Grace Rowed, her supervisors Dr. Stewart and Dr. Pukall, and Shannon Coyle and Megan Rowe for their work behind-the-scenes.

On December 16, 2021, Natasha successfully defended her MSc. thesis entitled, "Testing Predictors of Change in Suicidal Ideation among Transgender and Non-Binary People." Her thesis and poster cover the same study, however, the two differ in the timepoints investigated. For her thesis, Natasha was interested in understanding the impact of gender minority stressors and non-suicidal self-injury on suicide ideation during a relatively short time period of 4 months. Whereas for the poster, she extended the research to focus on changes over the period of one year to understand their impact more long-term.

In her PhD work, Natasha plans to investigate the role of emotion regulation on suicide ideation among adolescents who have experienced childhood abuse. She also plans to continue her research with historically underrepresented and marginalized groups, as well as integrating

frameworks and theories focusing on Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) and Sexual and Gender Minority (SGM) populations within suicide science.

Natasha says she plans to continue working in settings that allow her to interact with individuals in crisis, who have had early adverse and victimization experiences. “I have been enjoying both the research and clinical work that I’ve taken on during my graduate career thus far, which has given me a further appreciation for the scientist-practitioner approach,” Natasha concludes. “Looking further down the road, I think I would really enjoy a cross-appointed role between academic and medical settings.”