You are kindly invited to the public defense to obtain the degree of

**DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY**

Ms. Jill Sanghvi

Which will take place **ONLINE** on the 27th of September 2021 at 5PM

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**BRINGING FORWARD VOICES OF YOUNG PEOPLE WITH AUTISM IN INDIA**

**JURY**

**INTERN:**
- Prof. dr. Sarah Dury (Chair) (VUB)
- Prof. dr. Veerle Soyez (VUB)

**PROMOTOR(S)**

**PROMOTOR:**
- Prof. dr. Gerrit Loots (VUB)
- Prof. dr. Katrien De Koster (VUB)

**EXTERN:**
- Emer. Prof. dr. Don Sawatzky
  University of Alberta (Canada)
- Prof. dr. James Meredith Day
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SUMMARY

Introduction
For decades, literature about autism has been dominated by medical deficit discourses. What is missing within literature is the lived experience of people with autism; in particular, the voices of young people with autism. Accordingly, rather than hearing the potentially wonderful and unique stories of young people with autism, society is left listening to dominant discourses that portray the experience of living with autism as a struggle and burden. The intention of this study is to expand the narrative of autism beyond the story of deficits to stories of wonderfulness. Wonderfulness is a neologism coined by David Epston that refers to a young person’s skills and moral virtues, or qualities. Hence, I asked the question, ‘What stories do young people with autism have about their wonderfulness?’

Method
The inquiry was guided by narrative inquiry (Clandinin et al., 2016) and dialogical narrative analysis (Frank, 2010, 2012), embedded in the social constructionist framework. I engaged in conversations with six young people with autism. My conversational partners consisted of five boys and one girl aged between 10 and 18 years. From these conversations, poems were crafted for each individual conversational partner. The poems made visible their voices in a way that honors their diversity of expression and allowed for the circularity of expression of thoughts and feelings that is curtailed in sequential writing.

Results
From across the conversational partners’ individual poems, four commonalities of wonderfulness could be seen: 1) Diverse understandings of autism, reflects the different meanings that each individual conversational partner attached to autism which challenge the medical construction of autism and contribute to the neurodiversity movement; 2) Understanding social situations, their own needs, and others’ responses, reflects the insight into social situations, their own responses to those situations; and how would they want others to respond to them; 3) Thinking outside the box, which showed the diverse ways in which young people express their emotions and to identify passions that allow people with autism to live their lives in a way that fits for them; and 4) Helping and caring for others, wherein young people demonstrated the ability to help and care for their loved ones along with animals, wider society, and the environment.

Conclusion
These aspects of wonderfulness strengthen some of what is already known about the lived experiences of people with autism, narratives that are gathering momentum through the neurodiversity movement. However, they also add much more that has not previously been considered, particularly in the Indian context. Moving forward, this inquiry has shown that the voices of young people with autism matter. They have something important to say—whether that be in therapy, research, and media—about their lived experience with autism; and the wonderfulness and the possibilities that are created for themselves, their community, and for society at large.
Jill co-founded Narrative Practices India in 2020, where her role involves conceptualizing and facilitating trainings and collective programs in narrative practices for communities, therapists, and educators working in the field of mental health. She co-founded Happie World in 2014, a leisure and fun space for disabled young people. Jill has been a part of Ummeed Child Development Center since 2009, where she currently works as a counselor and trainer.

Jill has been drawn towards narrative ideas and practices in her work wherein she engages in therapeutic conversations with individuals, groups and communities. Jill teaches in the various mental health training programs in the spaces she works, with a particular interest in working with communities in the local context.

Jill has two published articles in Indian journals and been invited at various international conferences to speak about her work.

Jill has a Masters in Applied Psychology from Mumbai University and a Masters in Mental Health Counseling from Pace University, New York. Jill is currently a PhD student at Vrije Universiteit Brussel. Her research explores and brings forward voices of young people with autism in India.