

# DR ANDREW P. ALLEN - RESEARCH FELLOW

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I am a Research Fellow at TCAID. I studied psychology and economics at Trinity College Dublin, before completing a PhD in Psychology at Cardiff University. I have worked as a researcher at University College Cork (at the Department of Psychiatry and Neurobehavioural Science, and APC Microbiome Ireland) and at Maynooth University (at the Department of Psychology). I am also chair of the Irish Research Staff Association and the communications officer of Trinity Research Staff Association.

## HOW DID YOU GET INVOLVED WITH TCAID?

I saw that there was a research vacancy to work on the Intellectual Disability Supplement to the Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (IDS-TILDA: [idstilda.tcd.ie](http://idstilda.tcd.ie)). For over a decade, this project has been generating a fantastic dataset from a nationally representative cohort of people with intellectual disability (ID) aged 40+. I think the scale and the staying power of IDS-TILDA is really impressive, especially how the team manages to retain so many participants with very little drop-out. Professor Mary McCarron was generous in giving me time to discuss how I could fit in with the team and how I could contribute. I now divide my time between IDS-TILDA and a new project on post-diagnostic supports for people with ID who receive a diagnosis of dementia, with Professor McCarron, Dr Eimear McGlinchey and a team of collaborators. This will be running together with the National ID Memory Service. As part of this project, we have hired two research assistants, one of whom has personal experience of ID. I've been part of TCAID now for just over a year, and it's been a great experience.

## TELL ME A BIT ABOUT YOUR CHOSEN RESEARCH AREA?

I am particularly interested in dementia in people with ID. This population have a higher prevalence of dementia, and the onset happens at a younger age, but detection of dementia in this cohort is quite different from the general population, and there is not always the required specialist training in its detection within memory services. I'm excited to see the National Intellectual Disability Memory Service starting up at Tallaght University Hospital. Appropriate end-of-life care for people with ID, another issue that is central to dementia, remains a challenge; I'm also currently working with my colleagues on book chapters that aim to provide a better understanding of the topic. I'm also interested in cognitive reserve in people with ID. For example, to what extent does a higher level of education protect against the onset of dementia symptoms, in the context of Alzheimer-type brain pathology? This is particularly pertinent for people with Down syndrome, where such pathology becomes ubiquitous with ageing, although not all individuals with Down syndrome display the symptoms of dementia.

## **WHY HAVE YOU AN INTEREST IN THIS AREA?**

I have been interested in cognition for a long time, but I've been become increasingly involved in the whole area of ageing and cognition in the last few years. I have always believed that ageing is an intrinsically interesting topic, but I think the research zeitgeist is also generating a lot of energy around exploring the lives of older adults. So, when the opportunity arose with IDS-TILDA to get involved with research in an underexplored older population, I jumped at it

## **WHAT IMPACT WOULD YOU LIKE YOUR RESEARCH TO HAVE?**

I think that most researchers involved in ageing are hoping to maintain or improve people's quality of life as they get older. But not everyone ages in the same way and, as researchers, we have a role to play in creating a better understanding of the diversity that exists in our older populations so that policy and practice can adapt accordingly. In terms of recent output, I was happy to see a paper being published about research on family caregivers for people with dementia in the general population, that I conducted with colleagues at University College Cork and St. Finbarr's Hospital. The findings draw attention to the importance of safety issues as a cause of burden for family caregivers of people with dementia. This was a very satisfying collaboration with the clinical team at the memory clinic and old age psychiatry clinic as well (<https://academic.oup.com/ageing/article-abstract/49/1/52/5637595>).

## **HOW DID YOU AND YOUR COLLEAGUES RESPOND TO COVID-19?**

We have developed resources for people with ID, their families and support staff (e.g. easy read materials, webinars for support staff). To find out more, see the following link: <https://www.tcd.ie/tcaid/about/covid19.php> We have also conducted a survey of the IDS-TILDA cohort on COVID-19 and the associated lockdown (the report is available at: <https://idstilda.tcd.ie/wave4/launch.php>). We are currently preparing a second phase of data collection for this questionnaire, which will examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in greater depth.

## **HAVE THERE BEEN BENEFITS/DISADVANTAGES TO WORKING AT HOME? WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FORWARD TO POST-COVID?**

Although I save time on the commute, I do sometimes miss the atmosphere in the office. If/when we're in a post-COVID time I'll be seeing more friends and family face-to-face, going to gigs/theatre and maybe catching up on some travel. It'll be good to see the in-laws in Italy, and my wife and I are thinking of visiting Japan.

## **WHAT DO YOU LIKE TO DO WITH YOUR TIME THAT'S NOT WORK/RESEARCH RELATED?**

I enjoy writing fiction in my spare time. I'm currently finishing up a novel that explores mental health stigma, as well as broader themes of representation in fiction. I'm currently sending it around to literary agents. I will probably be starting another one soon.