# Employment Opportunities, Accommodations, Misunderstandings, and Debates: Findings from a Qualitative Study on Autism and Employment

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Learning Objectives

1. Discuss autistic employee's views on how they are the same as or different from other people at their jobs.

2. Discuss things that make work easier or harder for autistic employees.

3. Brainstorm how to balance messaging about similarities and differences when discussing autism and employment issues.
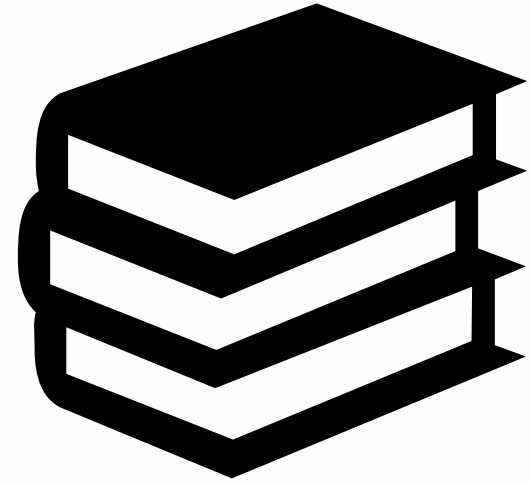
Outline

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How It All Fits Together

About Me

About Me

Jacob

I am a Research Assistant and Technical Aide at Michigan State University. I have a bachelor's degree in Journalism and Technical Communication from Ferris State University. I am Autistic and my goal in life is to help other Autistic individuals. My hobbies include watching movies and discussing them.

About Our Research

Background

- Autism is a different way of being in the world and is thus a target to ableist ideas.

- Autistic people face high rates of unemployment and underemployment.

- Research on autistic/non-autistic differences.

- How do people apply these ideas at work?

- Center perspectives of autistic people.

- This talk uses identity-first language.

Meanings of Autism, Meanings of Work

- Mixed-methods qualitative research
- Participants
  - Autistic people working and/or seeking work
  - People who helped them at work
  - Other autism professionals and advocates

What data we collected:

Interviews with all participants

Photo activity with autistic participants

Going to work with autistic participants

Who the participants were:

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Autistic Participants, Interview 1 (N=33)	N	%
Pronouns		
He/him	14	42%
She/her	9	27%
They/she	2	6%
She/they	2	6%
They/them	1	3%
Prefers proper noun name to any pronouns	1	3%
Any/no answer	4[a]	12%
Age		
Range	18-50	
Mean	30	
Median	29	
Declined[b]	3	
Person-centered language preference		
Autistic/autistic people	10	48%
Have autism/person with autism	4	19%
On the spectrum	2	10%
Does not care[c]	3	14%
Not stated	2	10%

Autistic Participants (N=33)	N	%
Job discussed in interview[d]		
Food preparation and serving	8	24%
Sales	8	24%
Education, training, and library	7	21%
Office and admin support	7	21%
Production	5	15%
Arts and media	4	12%
Building and grounds cleaning and maintenance	4	12%
Healthcare support	3	9%
Installation, maintenance, and repair	2	6%
Community and social service	2	6%
Personal care and service	2	6%
Other	5	15%
Discussed experience with disability hiring initiatives?		
Yes	13	39%
No	20	61%

[a] Others or the interviewer themselves in third person referred to two of these participants as "he" and two as "she."
[b] One of these participants described themselves as "30-something" and another as "40+"
[c] Two of these participants also used the use of the phrase "special needs" to encompass many disabilities.
[d] Some participants discussed more than one job.

How we use the data:

- Thematic analysis of interviews, photos, and fieldnotes

- *"a priori"* codebook of theories of autism from literature

- "emergent" codebook of meanings of autism, similarities with others, differences with others, things that make work easier, things that make work harder

Meanings of Autism

From the literature:

Central Coherence	Theory of Mind	Double Empathy Problem	Executive Functioning
Extreme Male Brain	Intense World	Mirror Neuron	Monotropism
Neurodiversity	Psychogenic Theories	Social Reward Theory	

Discussion Question Set 1

Which of the theories of autism we describe have you heard of?

Where did you hear of them?

Which, if any, do you agree with?

Participants use of these theories

- Some used language related to:
  - Intense World
  - Theory of Mind
  - Double Empathy
  - Monotropism
  - Executive Functioning
  - Central Coherence.
- Often discussed neurodiversity.

- Some rejected theories of:
  - Social Motivation
  - Extreme Male Brain

Some other meanings of autism

- Diagnosis
- Autistic identity
- Difference-not-deficit
- Love for routine
- Autism rights and advocacy
- Dealing with ableism

- Autism causes difficulties
- Autistic burnout
- Masking
- Disclosure issues

Discussion Question 2

Describe a time when you changed your idea about what autism means.

Things people said were similar/different:

- Demographics
- Likes & dislikes
- Life experiences
- Sensory experiences
- Work roles
- Values
- Knowledge and skills
- Accommodations, strategies, or tools
- Burnout

- Limitations
- Way of thinking
- Communication & social interaction styles
- Personality
- Personal connections
- Disability communities
- Neurodiversity communities

Other differences

- Autism is a difference
- Different behaviors
- Different ideas & perspectives
- Being weird or not normal

Other similarities

- Striving for equality

- We're all the same

- Individuality (we're all unique individuals)

Discussion Question 3

How do you balance messaging about similarity and difference when discussing autism and employment issues?

What Makes Work Easier/Harder

Things people said make work easier or harder:

- Objects
- People
- Employer missions
- (lack of) Help
- (lack of) Accommodations & services
- (lack of) Learning
- Personal traits
- Likes

- Attitudes and Emotions
- Masking
- Hiring practices
- Workplace environments and practices
- Pace
- Schedules

Other things people said make work easier:

- Diversity

- Strategies (informal, vs. formal accommodations)

Other things people said make work harder:

- The labor itself
- Interaction with physical health
- Communication
- People don't play right
- Discrimination

How It All Connects Together

Meanings of autism are important because:

- Characteristics participants attribute to autism can make things easier or harder at work.

- People use ideas about what autism is to find accommodations and strategies to make work easier.

- Autistic people must contend with "debates" about autism at work.

- (Mis)understanding impacts interpersonal relationships, masking, and disclosure at work.

Characteristics Example

- Communication skills, leadership skills, attention to detail, teaching, writing, advocacy skills, empathy, determination.
  - "These are, you know, these are all things that are sort of natural to me. In in my sort of, I don't know what's the right word, brand, flavor of autism, my place on the spectrum, that I've been able to capitalize on them and hone them even sharper."
- Participant also discussed many other characteristics they do not attribute to autism!

Accommodations and Strategies Example

- "I was able to get a workplace accommodation […] specifically regarding autism with my sensory issues. I was having difficulty working the drive-thru because the headset was extremely noisy […]. So, I was able to get an accommodation to not work drive-thru and to um be able to wear noise canceling headphones"

- Participants also discussed some strategies that they did not connect to autism!

Debates Example

- "They were having me ask, during April, Autism Awareness month, it should be Autism Acceptance Month, but they would ask, have me ask customers if they'd like to donate [to Autism Speaks] and every time customers said yes it broke my heart to have to do that. I was frustrated that they'd never asked autistic people like me what, if we think it's a good idea to give that money to that organization."

(Mis)understandings Examples:

- "Let's just say, I've had a lot of experience where in other jobs where people wanted me to go fast to go faster. And so it became - It actually became a little bit of a fear that when I would start out, then eventually they wouldn't - they wouldn't like me because I wasn't going fast enough and which actually turned out to be not true with the current job I have where they like me, because I do quality work, even though I'm not quite as fast as some of the other people I work along the side."

- "You know, like, I have like, all these little embarrassing things with secretaries and office assistants and things where, like, "can you help with the copier" and they don't understand why I don't understand how to do something. [....] They think I'm goofy and that's okay. If they think I'm goofy that's, that's a survival thing that I can live with."

Discussion Question 4

How does (mis)understanding autism impact working together?

Our main point

- Autistic employees' experiences are complex and intersectional.

- It's not always about autism.

- BUT different meanings of autism are important.

- Meanings of autism help people work together.

- Many workplace strategies are good for both autistic and non-autistic people.

- "Debates" about autism come up at work.

Questions & Comments & What else should we research?

You can also reach the research team by emailing Ariel at casciome@msu.edu or calling 517-353-9523

Credits

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