The Autism Paradox

THE IRRESOLVABLE CONFLICT FOR AUTISTICS IN THE WORKPLACE

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The Autism Paradox

▶ **Introduction: Stereotypes vs. Lived Experiences; Reflexivity**

▶ **Disability Anti-Discrimination Laws**

▶ **Data: an online Asperger's community**

▶ **Results**

▶ **The Autism Paradox; Costs and Consequences of Masking**

▶ **Final Thoughts and Recommendations**

Autism Stereotypes

▶ **Autism stereotypes are inaccurate**

- ▶ Simon Baron Cohen; "Mind-blindness" and Theory of Mind (TOM)
- ▶ *Rainman,* 1988 and the savant myth
- ▶ "Looking" autistic

▶ **Social norms are not innate**

- ▶ What happens "naturally" for neurotypicals does not occur in autistics
- ▶ The illusion of built-in social facility is a barrier to understanding autism

Lived Experiences of Autism

- **Expectations vs. reality**
  - What **real** autism looks like
  - The inside/outside conundrum
  - Sensory challenges

- **"High-functioning" autistics and masking**
  - Camouflaging and compensating

- **"Spoons" of mental energy**
  - Costs and consequences of hiding autism in the workplace

Autism doesn't "look" like stereotypical autism

▶ **Uncamouflaged autism reads as anti-social**

  ▶ Blank or "angry" facial expressions

  ▶ Monotonic tone of voice

    ▶ "rude", "mean", "bossy", "aggressive"

  ▶ Off-putting body language

    ▶ Arms crossed, looking away, fidgeting or rocking, "stimming"

  ▶ Blunt or direct speech

    ▶ Lack of small talk, euphemism, implication

▶ **Labeled as "difficult" or having an "attitude"**

  ▶ Unable to get or keep jobs, unable to work at their actual capacity

Anti-Discrimination Laws

▶ **U.S.A. - Americans With Disabilities Act, 1990 (ADA)**

  ▶ Disability accommodations required in public spaces and the workplace; "major life activity

▶ **U.K. - Disability Discrimination Act, 1995; Equality Act, 2010**

  ▶ "Reasonable adjustments" for the physically disabled

▶ **Explicit (physical) vs. implicit (psychiatric/mental) accommodations**

  ▶ Language and loopholes for employers of the psychiatrically disabled

"Asperger's" – an online community

▶ **Private FB group for those with Asperger's ("Aspies") and their families**

  ▶ 22,000 members as of June 2020

  ▶ "Safe space"

▶ **Keyword search: "work", "job", "career", "accommodations", "tone"**

  ▶ Self-reported workplace challenges

  ▶ Permission to use quotations

  ▶ "Tone" in natural autistic modes of speaking

Results - Workplace Challenges

▶ **Three overarching themes**

　　▶ Autistics face discrimination at work

　　▶ Accommodations are rare

　　▶ Burnout incidence is high

Discrimination at Work

▶ *"one of my managers is constantly talking down to me, giving me menial tasks to do, belittling me in front of my other co-workers and customers. She is the deputy general manager. She won't let [me] do anything."*

▶ *"I'm not sure if diagnosis or advocacy is [helping]...when they know you have Asperger's, people actually seem to LOOK for reasons to fire you."*

▶ *"I am being harassed at work. I have been called the r [retard] word and slow by employees and management."*

▶ *"for many of us autistics...being ourselves leads to us being shunned and isolated because our 'being ourselves' is also seen as inappropriate, even if there is no harm coming from our behavior."*
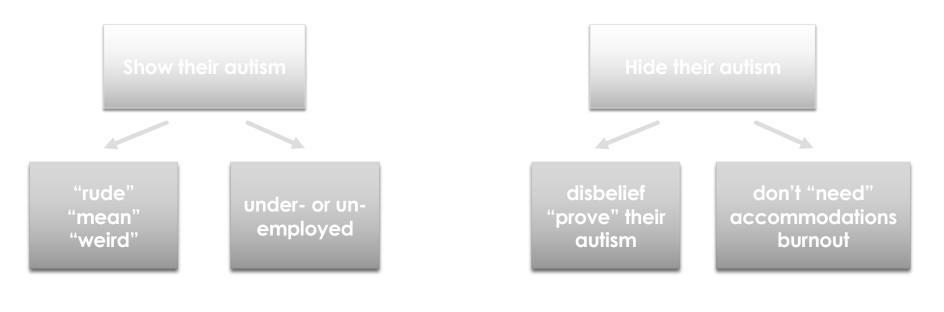
Accommodations Are Rare

▶ *"I'm getting increasingly frustrated with my workplace. [It] wasn't made for autistic people. I feel like I'm simply tolerated and thrown scraps of accommodation here and there, despite the kind and supportive words I get. I try to explain how and why I struggle, and I just get weak nods. They can never fully understand."*

▶ *"when we need or request accommodation, the burden often falls on us to prove we need the accommodation…in social situations, we are the ones who are forced to change, or do most of the adjustment, rather than meeting us somewhere in the middle."*

▶ *"I tried working for a friend, but I run behind so badly due to the depth I go I can't run to the time he wants me to. I'm getting depressed by the fact I run behind every day and am incapable of seeing the number of patients he expects me to. He seems to think that I just need to speed up, but I simply can't."*

Burnout Is Endemic

▶ *"I have lost interest in my hobbies such as reading or writing or spending [time] with friends and family. I usually come from work and just want to sleep until the next day, even if I get off work at 5 pm. I am getting headaches because I am stressed out and I am irritable."*

▶ *"I've just spent the entire weekend in bed, depressed, dreading Monday morning. I've even been thinking about quitting and changing careers to something less stressful,"* and adds, *"I can't seem to work in a way that fits with what society wants."*

▶ *"it just keeps getting worse. I could find another job, but this isn't unique to the office I'm in. I get scared that this is just how it's going to be."*

The Autism Paradox

Autistics who want to work outside the home have only two options:

Costs and Consequences of Masking

- **Disbelief**
  - Don't "look" or "sound" autistic
  - Asked to "prove" autism by sharing private psychological information

- **Exhaustion and burnout**
  - Masking doubles mental energy required for work
  - Unable to take needed time off to recharge

- **Lack of and reverse accommodations**
  - Employer decides if requested accommodations are "reasonable"
  - Autistic is forced to accommodate neurotypical co-workers

Recommendations

- **Update existing laws to include explicit accommodations for psychiatric disabilities**
  - Private office spaces, flexible hours, remote work, paid by productivity instead of hourly
- **Incorporate neurodivergence sensitivity training into onboarding**
  - Dispel stereotypes, describe the autistic sensory and social experience, and affirm need for accommodations
- **Include actually autistic people in popular media, industry, research, and non-profit work**
  - Bring real lived autistic experiences into portrayals of autistics and services and industries for them
  - Let autistics speak for themselves

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Recommended Resources