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Article

Learning to dance the interview dance:

The job interview as an obstacle to employment for autistic university graduates

Abstract

Purpose
This study examines how the traditional job interview might form an obstacle to autistic people obtaining employment. It then offers a range of strategies that could make the traditional job interview more effective in allowing employers to identify and hire autistic employees.

Design/methodology/approach
A triangulated, qualitive approach is employed, comprising (i) five focus groups with a total of 23 students at a UK university who identity as autistic, and (ii) semi-structured interviews with five of their professional support practitioners. Thematic analysis was then applied to identify causes, effects and possible solutions of the use of traditional recruitment interviews.

Findings
The analysis identified three main strategies, and two sub-strategies, for refining the traditional job interview with the aim of assisting more autistic people to find suitable work: abandoning the traditional interview, adapting it (divided in to adjusting and augmenting sub-strategies), and accepting it as necessary.

Originality
Three original conclusions were drawn from the analysis: first, that while the traditional interview tends to be biased against autistic people, it is not in itself a particularly acute method for selecting job candidates; second, that the application of universal design to adapting the interview process would be beneficial not only to neurodivergent people, but also to neurotypicals and employers; and third, that the fear of disclosure represents a major obstacle to autistic people trusting in schemes intended to assist them.

Keywords: Autism; Employment; Interview; Neurodiversity; Universal design

Article classification: Research paper

1. Introduction

The UK's Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) recently drew attention to the size of the employment gap for autistic people (DWP, 2023). Autistic people have one of the lowest employment rates of any group, with fewer than 3 in 10 in work. According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), this compares with around 5 in 10 disabled people in employment and nearly 8 in 10 of non-disabled people (ONS, 2021). Austin and Pisano (2017) further note that many autistic people are underemployed, working in positions that are part-time, casual and do not make full use of their qualifications.

The existence of this employment gap is concerning for three main reasons. First, autistic people who find themselves unemployed or underemployed are likely to suffer a lower standard of living, quality of life and mental health (Scott et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2014). Second, by not employing autistic people, the economy is failing to effectively utilise a potentially valuable resource. The skills and knowledge of autistic people are, quite simply, going to waste (Smith and Kirby, 2021). Third, failing to employ potentially employable people needlessly increases the burden on government for welfare support (Taylor et al., 2014). The case for hiring and retaining more autistic employees would seem especially compelling given the current economic situation (Austin and Pisano, 2017). The UK has experienced significant workforce challenges in recent times, and these have affected the ability of many sectors to recover from thhe effects of the Covid-19 pandemic (Causa et al., 2022).

While a substantial literature exists on people's lived experiences of autism in the workplace (e.g., Bury et al., 2019, 2020; Gal et al., 2015), research is more limited when it comes to understanding the reasons why the autism employment gap persists. Autistic people tend to have skills and knowledge that are scarce in the workforce and could be harnessed by organisations were they only to employ them (Baron-Cohen et al., 2009; Bury et al., 2020). This is particularly true in relation to highly skilled autistic people with post-secondary education (Raymaker et al., 2022). It has been argued that there may exist an 'autism advantage' that autistic people may have in the workplace (Austin and Pisano, 2017; Doyle and McDowall, 2021; Khan et al., 2022; Russell et al., 2019). This suggests that autistic people often possess traits associated with their conditions that help them to do a job more effectively than most neurotypical people (Hayward et al., 2019). It is also argued that increasing neurodiversity in the workforce may bring a range of significant organisational benefits that would not otherwise be captured, including improved productivity, greater staff retention, reduced absenteeism and enhanced organisational reputation (Scott et al., 2017, Smith and Kirby, 2021).

While the existence of an autism employment gap is not exclusive to the UK (e.g., only 21% of autistic people are in employment in the US according to Scott et al., 2019), the DWP has recently completed an investigation into the reasons for the persistence of the autism employment gap in the UK, and to identify possible ways to narrow it. Known as the Buckland Review (Buckland, 2024, p.29), one of its recommendations was to 'modernise' the recruitment process, indicating that "the interview may not be a fair way or necessary way to recruit autistic candidates".

The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to examine the role of the interview in perpetuating the autism employment gap. The interview is, of course, only one possible barrier to autistic people gaining employment, and this paper will begin by identifying the reasons why autistic people may be less represented in the workforce. However, the interview is arguably a significant barrier for many autistic people. This is because it is usually the final stage they encounter before the job is offered to them or not. The interview is particularly important for autistic graduates, who are likely to be applying for jobs where the candidate selection process culminates in a formal interview of some kind. This paper sets out to explore how the traditional interview may be a barrier to employment by exploring the perspectives of autistic university students and their wellbeing support professionals.

2. Literature review

2.1. Explaining the autism employment gap

It has been suggested that the persistence of the autism employment gap is at least partly due to there not being enough positions suitable for autistic people in the workplace (Lorenz et al., 2016). There may be some basis to this suggestion, particularly among those autistic people who have autistic traits such as hypersensitivities and social communication difficulties, which could hamper them from operating in a typical workplace (Scott et al., 2017). It should also be noted that while employers in most countries are legally required to make reasonable workplace adjustments (e.g., to an employee's workstation, work routine, unform requirements or sick-leave arrangements), these laws are often not well-enforced (Waisman-Nitzan et al., 2021).

It is important to recognise that, for many reasons, most autistic people of working age actually do want to work (Hendricks, 2010; Smith and Kirby, 2021). Djela (2021) presents the statistic that 77% of autistic people of working age in the UK want to be in work. There are, however, many possible explanations for the lower employment rate among autistic people, which will be noted in this section.

One possible factor is that autistic people tend to spend more time in post-18 education, delaying their entry into the workforce. This may be because they tend to lack fixed career aspirations or plans, their condition making it harder for them to engage with career planning. They may fear leaving their comfort zone, having spent most of their lives in education (Dipeolu et al., 2015). It is certainly the case that more autistic people are entering the university system in the UK and other countries (Dipeolu et al., 2015; Gurbuz et al., 2019). This statistical trend may, however, be due to more autistic people now being formally diagnosed (Bendix, 2023). Autistic students are not always well served, however, by careers programmes in their educational institutions, which may not fully recognise the needs of neurodivergent students (Bölte, 2021; Dipeolu et al., 2015). Studies have found that autistic university students tend to rely more on their institutional mentors, academics who appear to be more caring and family members for careers advice and support than they do their institutional careers service (Pesonen et al., 2021).

Another observation is that autistic people tend to stay a relatively short time in a given job, so that at any point in time the employment statistics will show that proportionally more of them are looking for work than their neurotypical counterparts. This may be because they soon find

their work unstimulating or ill-suited to their talents (Dreaver et al., 2020). Alternatively, it could be because their condition means they are poor timekeepers or take lots of sick leave, leading to them to be dismissed (Holwerda et al., 2012). A lack of effective workplace adjustments might cause more autistic workers to be dismissed (Waisman-Nitzan et al., 2021). There is, however, little evidence to suggest that autistic people spend less time in a particular job: it is often argued that autistic people tend to be very loyal (Patton, 2019), and this would presumably extend to t hem being loyal to their employers (Smith and Kirby, 2021).

An intersectionality effect is undoubtedly also at work in the statistics, in that autistic people tend to have other characteristics that make them less likely to be in employment. A possible co-determinant might be, for example, that autistic people tend to suffer poor mental health (Holwerda et al., 2012) and/or have low self-esteem (Nagib and Wilton, 2020; Smith et al., 2014). Those with poor mental health may not be able to work due to their condition or be more likely to be dismissed due to taking what is felt by employers to be excessive amounts of sickness leave; those with low self-esteem may not feel it is worth their while applying for jobs, believing they will be unsuccessful. Studies have found such intersectionality effects to be at work among neurodivergent people (Doyle et al., 2022; Holwerda et al., 2012)

2.2. Challenges posed by the job interview for the autistic candidate

Other factors that might better explain the persistence of the autism employment gap do not pertain to the individual's desire or ability to work but to the systematic barriers autistic people tend to face when looking for work and to remaining in work. The cultural and institutional norms that exist regarding recruitment practices can, and often do, disadvantage autistic people (Lorenz et al., 2016). These could include the way in which job advertisements tend to be written, including lists of 'essential' or 'desirable' criteria, which autistic people may treat as literal requirements and hence decide not even to apply for the job vacancy (Smith and Kirby, 2021). Employers also tend to use application forms to help them shortlist job candidates, but many autistic people struggle to complete these well (Smith et al., 2014), perhaps because they fail to write enough, feeling that a direct and simple answer will suffice, or because they write too much, providing distracting and unnecessary detail (Smith and Kirby, 2021).

The Buckland Review (2024), meanwhile, suggests that the formal job interview may seriously disadvantage autistic candidates. Performing well in an interview situation can be particularly difficult for autistic people, who may have more limited social skills (Finn et al., 2023). Flower et al. (2021) cite empirical evidence that the interviewer being able to form a rapport with a candidate typically accounts for 75% of the interviewer's overall evaluation of a job applicant. Autistic traits such as fiddling with an object are often taken as a sign of nervousness or lack of self-confidence (Finn et al., 2023), while failure to make sustained eye contact may be interpreted as evasiveness (Stickland et al., 2013). Autistic people can also unwittingly give the impression that they are bored if they do not modulate their voices in a neurotypical way (Xu et al., 2015). Autistic candidates can be overly direct or honest in their answers to the interview questions (Flower et al, 2021). They can also struggle to engage in the 'small talk' expected before and after the interview (Khang et al., 2023).

Such impressions may be very important in determining whether an autistic person is offered the job. Evidence of this is a study by Whelpley and May (2023), in which autistic job applicants scored significantly lower in terms of approachability, likeability and attractiveness

than neurotypical applicants. Social performance was evidently more important than qualifications or experiences in the interviewers' decision making. Tomczak et al. (2021), meanwhile, found that the social communication demands of a job interview was an important driver of poor performance by autistic candidates.

The present paper therefore seeks to address the following research questions. First, what specific challenges or disadvantages do job interviews present to autistic candidates? Secondly, how can interview processes best be modified to achieve equitability for autistic candidates?

With few exceptions (Finn et al., 2023; Raymaker et al., 2023; Tomczak et al., 2021), research into the job search and recruitment experiences of autistic people has rarely been based on the voices of autistic people themselves. This study therefore adopts a qualitative approach based mainly on the analysis of data collected during focus groups with autistic university students. Focus groups have not been widely used among autistic people to date, one possible reason being that they can be hard to conduct and analyse. In view of these likely difficulties, the present study applied an adapted focus-group method, supplemented by interviews with students' support tutors. These interviews served to strengthen the findings of the study by allowing triangulation to take place.

3. Methods

Two methods were used in this research, the first being focus groups with students with autism and related conditions, and the second in-depth interviews with staff members involved in the support and mentoring of autistic students. In view of the tendency noted in many of the studies included in the interview for autistic people to find interviews challenging, and for the information flow to be stultified or biased as a result, an early decision was made not to use interviews with the student participants. Focus groups were chosen instead, based on their ability to generate rich, qualitative data, while not subjecting participants to the stresses of a personal interview. Following ethical approval from the university, the two methods were implemented in parallel with one another. The aim of this was to attempt to maximise potential for the cross-fertilisation of ideas, as well as to enable the triangulation of findings to allow more robust and insightful conclusions to be drawn (Flick, 2004).

3.1. Focus groups

Participants were recruited through the university's social group for students identifying with autism and, as such, were self-selecting. Five focus groups were held: two in March 2022, two in December 2022, and one in February 2023. They were designed bearing in mind the needs and preferences of autistic students (Fayette and Bond, 2018). Each lasted one hour in view of the difficulty many autistic people have in focusing for long period of time. A maximum group size of five in view of many autistic individual's preference to interact in relatively small groups. The focus groups took place in a room that would be familiar, as it was a frequent venue for their social group meetings. A £10 gift voucher was offered to each participant as reasonable compensation for their time.

Of the 23 participants, nine were male and 14 were female. Ages ranged from 18 to the early 40s, and a wide range of ethnicities were included. All participants identified as having autism, although not all of them had a formal diagnosis. Participants often also reporting having other

neurodivergent conditions alongside their autism, such as ADHD and dyslexia, as well as mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression which often accompany autism.

The same line questioning was used in each focus group (see Figure 1). A logical sequence of topics was used to draw narratives from the participants, beginning with the formation of their career aspirations, moving through to their career planning, then to their employability and then to their experience of searching for jobs (focusing particularly on their experiences with job interviews), ending with a discussion of their experiences of being in, staying in and leaving work. The last of these was possible because all of the students had been, or were currently, in work of some kind. For some, this was a previous career before returning to education; for others it was temporary work, summer jobs, placements or volunteer work.

The proceedings were audio recorded in full and professionally transcribed. The transcripts were then read by both researchers, first to ensure accuracy and then again to fill in any gaps where the recording was unclear.

*** Figure 1 near here ***

3.2. Interviews

Interviews were conducted with all five of the specialist practitioners involved in providing counselling support to autistic students at the university. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was semi-structured, with questions mirroring those asked in the focus groups but from the perspective of the staff member (see Figure 1). One of the researchers served as interviewer, while the other remained an observer. The interviews were audio recorded and professionally transcribed.

3.3. Data analysis

The combined dataset, comprising the transcripts of the focus groups and interviews, was subjected to thematic analysis in a manner based on that of Clarke and Braun (2017). Participants were given pseudonyms. An interactive procedure was adopted, in which each researcher took the dataset in turn to code the data thematically for each of the research questions under investigation. The researchers used a process of close comparison, triangulated both by question and by individual, to identify themes from the dataset. In order to ensure reflexivity in this process, weekly discussions were held between the two researchers (Fook, 1999). The interactive nature of this process allowed for the re-organising and progressive narrowing of the mutually agreed themes. The themes were then given names and their relationship to one another established. Quotations were then chosen to illustrate them.

4. Results and discussion

Three major themes and two sub-themes were drawn out of the data, each relating to a different strategy for making the job interview more autism friendly (see Figure 1). This section of the paper will present these themes, using verbatim quotes to illustrate each of them.

*** Figure 2 near here ***

4.1. Abandon the traditional interview

Some of the focus-group participants considered the traditional interview to be fundamentally flawed as an equitable way of selecting job candidates from a neurodiverse field. They considered it to be systematically biased against autistic people because of the social conventions it is based upon. This follows the observation made by Honeybourne (2019) that the workplace is "designed by neurotypicals, for neurotypicals".

One focus-group participant made a particularly insightful analogy in this respect, likening the traditional job interview to a dance for which he does not know the steps and hence feels clumsy:

> "[…] the interview [is] a dance, and you've not been told what the steps are. You've got this person there who's trying to dance with you, and you've no idea what the what the steps are. So, of course, you're making a mess – standing on their feet – and you're clumsy." (Billy, Postgraduate)

The literature contains many examples of the challenges with social communication typically associated with autism and these may be amplified in an interview situation where the candidate may be under a high level of stress (Tomczak et al., 2021), and where the unwritten conventions of the interview are unintelligible to them. As one of the autism practitioners noted:

> "Interviews do have a lot of unwritten rules and that makes it very, very scary for a lot of people […] it's hard because it's not something you get to practice […] learning the rules about how to queue in Greggs and get a sausage roll may be scary for a lot of autistic students but they get to practice that a lot of the time." (Evan, Practitioner)

Examples of the specific challenges noted by participants included most of those already familiar to researchers (see Table 1). The challenges faced by autistic job candidates do, however, go far beyond negotiating the individual components of the interview: they strike at the heart of what the interview is attempting to achieve. Indeed, Billy went on to suggest that the fundamental purpose of the job interview is to provide a context in which the interviewers can try to form a quick rapport with the candidate:

*** Table 1 near here ***

> "What it's actually about is determining whether or not that person can form a rapport with you […] they won't tell you this but what they're looking to determine is whether this is a nice person, who they're going to enjoy working with because, by definition, you wouldn't be applying for the job if you couldn't do it." (Billy, Postgraduate)

As noted by Flower et al. (2021), research suggests that good rapport with the interviewer is a predominant success factor in a traditional job interview. Forming rapport in the short time provided in most interviews relies fundamentally on the candidate (as well as the interviewer, of course) having strong social communication skills. This tends, however, to be challenging for many autistic people.

The traditional interview could potentially, therefore, be considered fundamentally flawed as a means of selecting the best candidate from a neurodiverse field – and best abandoned. It could

be replaced by a process that has been developed using universal design (Doyle and McDowall, 2021). This involves designing a product, environment, programme or service so that it can be used with equal ease by everyone, whoever they might be (Lid, 2013). This could conceivably be extended to process such as job interviews to the benefit of not only those who are deemed to need the new design but also, in many cases, everyone else. Replacing the traditional job interview with, for example, a practical trial period, could benefit not only autistic candidates but also neurotypical candidates who become nervous at interviews or are simply not able to 'sell themselves' effectively. As Ffion suggested:

> "I go into my interviews and I say, 'right, we'll do the basics' and I can guarantee you I will talk a million miles an hour! But tell me to do something and I do it […] and then, nine times out of ten, I get the job, because I can do the task they've given me." (Ffion, Undergraduate)

Such a selection process may, however, be more time-consuming and difficult to arrange than a traditional interview, and it would still not allow the organisational leaders to 'get to know' the candidates in the usual way. Fully eliminating interviews may therefore be too great a step for most organisations.

4.2. Adapt the traditional interview

Rather than to abandon the traditional job interview and replace it with an alternative means of selecting candidates, it may be more suitable to adapt the process. The choice then would be whether to **adjust** the interview or to **augment** it with additional selection tools.

4.2.1. Adjustments to the interview

Adjusting the interview implies redesigning the process. It essentially involves taking one or more of the challenges noted in Table 1 and modifying the interview process to reduce or, ideally, remove the challenge. Candidates could, for example, be provided with the interview questions in advance so they can prepare their answers. Another example could be reducing the level formality of the interview by removing the interposing desk in the interview room. A range of further examples is set out in Table 2.

*** Table 2 near here ***

Making these adjustments only for autistic job candidates requires them to announce, or 'disclose', their condition prior to the interview. Participants in the focus groups noted, however, that the decision whether or not to disclose their condition was a particular dilemma (Honeybourne, 2019; Flower et al., 2021). The benefit is that the candidate can negotiate reasonable adjustments to the interview with the employer in advance of it taking place (Khan et al., 2022). Employers in many countries are indeed required by law to provide reasonable adjustments to job interviews for autistic people (Gemma, 2023). There is also a growing trend for employers to sign up to assurance schemes such as the UK's 'Disability Confident' scheme (Lindsay et al., 2019), which promises fair treatment for disabled employees and job candidates.

The downside of disclosure was also discussed by focus-group participants, many of whom perceived disclosing their condition to be likely to result in discrimination. They were especially concerned that disclosing their neurodivergence would cause the interviewers to believe that they would not fit well into the culture of the organisation, would require costly equipment to support them in their work, would take more time to supervise, and so on. While these concerns do not generally have any grounds, that does not prevent autistic people being concerned that discrimination might still happen:

> "[…] there's always going be someone who is going to discriminate and think this is what this person is going to be like, because of the stereotypical mindset they just see the label and they associate you with the variation of that label which isn't going to be the right one." (Jason, Undergraduate)

Participants also expressed concern that being open about their autism in the workplace would result in colleagues treating them differently if they were to secure the job:

> "As soon as you say autism, you're instantly infantilised because people instantly think you've got a learning disability […] and instantly whenever I tell people I'm autistic, I think they automatically think 'oh, he's autistic, let's be easy on him." (Grant, Undergraduate).

In this respect, participants tended to agree that they did not want to be part some kind of quota:

> "There's a risk of them hiring me because I'm autistic to check a box. I think that would almost be just as bad. I would feel like if I had not earned the position." (Nia, Undergraduate)

This may, of course, discourage autistic people from disclosing their condition. Rather than levelling the playing field for autistic job applicants, the provision of adjustments to the interview subject to disclosure by candidates of their condition may thus hamper the likelihood of employment. As Khan et al, (2022, p.11) note, "the stigmatizing effects of disclosure of neurocognitive conditions create obstacles for neurodivergent jobseekers, as the traditional recruitment and selection practices have an exclusionary effect without the appropriate accommodations".

Participants in the focus groups lacked trust in assurance schemes such as the UK's Disability Confident scheme. Such schemes do not solve the basic dilemma of disclosure because:

> "You cannot, as a job applicant, determine, right at the outset, how revealing that information is going to be perceived. You cannot guarantee whether it's going to actually jeopardise your chances of being employed." (Billy, Postgraduate).

The problem with such schemes is that they are predicated upon trust; yet trust is a learned social behaviour that represents a significant challenge for many autistic people. Trust relies upon people receiving and using a range of cues, and the inclusion of a logo on a job advertisement may be insufficient to bridge the gap. Autistic people tend to take promises very seriously and when they are broken, for whatever reason, easily lose trust in a person or

organisation. This suggests that assurance schemes may be ineffective and that it is better to adjust the process for everybody, following the principle of universal design.

4.2.2. Augmenting the interview

If the disclosure dilemma cannot easily be resolved by adjusting the interview, augmenting it with other techniques might be effective. This would involve asking the candidates to undertake other tasks before, during or after the interview, such as practical tests, simulation exercises, video pitches, psychometric tests, group work or a short trial work period. Many employers are, of course, already doing such things, although more often for reasons of efficiency than equity. Indeed, it is often the case that there are so many applicants for a given position that employers are effectively forced to adopt additional means of assessing candidates. These may be used to help them narrow down the field when shortlisting applicants for interview or help them to choose between applicant with similar educational qualification and work experience, who interviewed equally well. This may be reinforced by the increasing tendency for interview candidates, neurotypical or neurodivergent, to be very well versed in the 'rules of the game' and well aware of how to conduct themselves in an interview and the 'right way' to answer classic interview questions.

Participants in the focus groups were generally wary of these other selection techniques. Many considered it unlikely they would be any fairer than the traditional interview, perhaps even less so. Such views may come from the media or from personal experience. The possible bias in the application of artificial intelligence tools through video recordings of job applicants has, for example, been discussed in the press (BBC, 2022). Some had personal experience of taking additional tests and exercises as part of the interview process, and felt they were not well-suited to neurodivergent people:

> "[The] few times that I've tried to apply for jobs […] they always have that like questionnaire that's like a list of like social scenarios, like customer [complaint handling]. With my mum, over my shoulder, trying to help me answer the questions, I got 'no, sorry, you didn't pass the test'". (Ann, Undergraduate)

It was widely felt that psychometric tests are biased against autistic people because they tend to be hypothetical and autistic people often struggle to think is such abstract terms:

> "Those tests are terrible and I've failed every one of those I've ever done! […] They will weed out a lot of neurodivergent people who actually, when it comes to real-life example of the things they are testing on are probably going to be very practical and very good at them but not so much the hypothetical, made up, here's a choice of three binary answers." (Evan, Practitioner)

Some participants did say, however, that in some ways they preferred assessment methods other than the traditional interview. Allie, for example, said that:

> "I prefer if it's a group interview, I can at least watch two people and see what they do and do the same thing." (Allie, Undergraduate)

An alternative selection method based on the principles of universal design would arguably be preferable to augmenting the interview process just for some candidates. This would imply augmenting the interview with activities which, unlike group interviews, do not require well-developed skills in social interaction. Indeed, not having to be the first one to speak in a group interview would doubtless suit many neurotypical candidates who do not feel comfortable in new social situations.

Johnny, meanwhile, would take a particular strategy in a group work, even if this would not necessarily come across very well to his peers and the interview panel:

> "… with group work, I would always project myself to be […] not necessarily a team leader, but a leading sort of member of a group, just so I can have sort of stability and … control." (Johnny, Undergraduate)

It could, of course, be argued that the most effective means of augmenting the interview is to ensure that all the interviewers on the panel have received rigorous training on neurodiversity in the workplace and the implicit biases they may have when interviewing a neurodiverse group of job candidates. As Johnny noted:

> "… the number one thing would be just for the interviewer to be aware and accepting of neurodiversity (Johnny, Undergraduate)

4.3. Accept the traditional interview

If the traditional interview is neither to be abandoned nor adapted, the only logical option is for it to be accepted. In turn, the responsibility would fall on the applicants to address the difficulties. Autistic people can, of course, be trained in interview skills, and there is, indeed, a growing market for 'autism coaches' to help autistic people to secure jobs. With practice, autistic people can be 'taught the steps of the dance':

> "I have had training and what that coach is doing for me is, basically, teaching me … how neurotypicals think, how neurotypicals operate, what the expectations are, how I go about it." (Billy, Postgraduate)

An increasing number of studies have indeed been conducted into how effective job coaching can be for autistic people (e.g., Rosales and Whitlow, 2019; Smith et al., 2014; Xu et al., 2015). There is thus some evidence that training in interview techniques can be effective in helping autistic people gain employment. The biggest difficulty with this strategy, however, is that it could necessitate heavy 'masking' on the part of interview candidates. Masking involves adopting behaviours to try to hide or surpass their autistic traits: in other words, to try as far as possible to 'act neurotypical'. Masking for an extended period can be extremely stressful, perhaps even exhausting:

> "Masking is what I do constantly – it's exhausting! [Once] I got to a point where I couldn't function. So that's what it kind of does to you." (Sue, Postgraduate)

This is, indeed, effectively what we are doing at the moment. The stubborn persistence of the autism employment gap therefore suggests that training autistic people in interview skills is not an especially effective approach.

5. Conclusions

This study suggests that the traditional job interview can – and often does – serve as an obstacle to employment for autistic people. This is important for three main reasons. First, by not employing autistic people we are failing to harness any 'autism advantage' they may have. Secondly, the quality of life for autistic people is likely to be lower if they are unemployed. Thirdly, the situation is unnecessarily burdening the state in terms of the associated welfare payments. The autism employment gap therefore needs to be closed (Buckland, 2024).

The question this raises is, of course, what should be done to remove this obstacle? This study identified three different strategies, and two sub-strategies, that could be adopted. None of them could be considered an ideal solution to the problem at hand: each had its own advantages and disadvantages.

In choosing between these approaches, this paper makes three major contributions to knowledge. First, if the traditional job interview is to be abandoned or adapted, many of the alternative practices would also benefit neurotypical candidates. As such, alternative methods of selecting employees could represent a 'win-win-win' situation, improving matters not only for neurodivergent people and employers but also for neurotypical people. An important contribution of this reforming study is therefore that changes to interview practices, if these are to take place, should be informed by the principles of universal design. Universal design has often been applied in the context of disability to hard infrastructure, such as buildings (e.g., Hamraie, 2017), but much less widely to soft processes, such as job interviews. Table 2 provides some initial examples as to how the selection process could change. Further research is required, however, to gain a greater understanding of what a universally designed job interview would best involve in practice.

A second contribution of this study is that one of the main reasons why interviews are often inefficient at identifying the ideal job candidate is that the social conventions of the interview – or the 'steps of the dance' – are focused on trying to find who will fit best into the existing workplace culture. This represents a systematic obstacle to autistic job applicants, who will be unlikely fit well into a workplace that has been designed by and for neurotypicals (Honeybourne, 2019).

Thirdly, the results of this study suggest that assurance schemes (such as the 'Disability Confident' scheme in the UK) may be ineffective in reducing the autism employment gap, as they rely on autistic people disclosing their condition. Participants in this study were often wary of doing this because they have no guarantee that it will not result in them being discriminated against in the interview (and then later, if they get the job, in the workplace). The focus-group participants suggested that there is considerable stigma associated with autism. Assurance schemes require trust to operate well, yet autistic people are often slow to put their trust into a system that does not clearly protect their interests. If the job interview was to be reformed according to the principles of universal design, such schemes would of course not be needed: the interview process would be designed to be objectively fair to everyone. This is a further potential area in which future research could usefully build upon the findings of this study.

5.1. Limitations

As with any research, this study has certain limitations. It must be recognised, for example, that the use of focus groups with participants who, by definition, have social communication difficulties, may have biased the results (Fayette and Bond, 2018). Indeed, some participants may have been reluctant to tell their stories because of social shyness, while others may have put a slant on their experiences to appear to be socially acceptable or fit in. There was also a noted tendency for some participants to dominate the conversations. While every effort was taken to ensure that all voices were heard, the decision to limit the length of the focus groups to one hour may have resulted in some views not being fully captured due to lack of time.

Another limitation of this research is that, as noted above, there is an observable tendency for autistic people to experience poor mental health, including anxiety and depression. Many also have other neurodivergent conditions such as ADHD. It is likely that such conditions may also have a negative effect on the interview outcomes of autistic candidates. The incidence and magnitude of such effects remains, however, unknown at the present time.

Notes:

The term 'autistic people' is used in the paper in preference to 'people with autism' as this is the stated preference of most autistic people and also the terminology recommended by organisations such as the National Autistic Society.

The term 'disabled people' is used here to mirror the use of 'autistic people'. While some people prefer the term 'persons with disabilities', there is no generally accepted option.

The term 'neurodiversity' refers to the tendency for human brain function and cognition to vary naturally among a given population. People who have neurodevelopmental conditions such as autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyspraxia and Tourette's Syndrome, are termed 'neurodivergent', while those who do not are termed 'neurotypical'.

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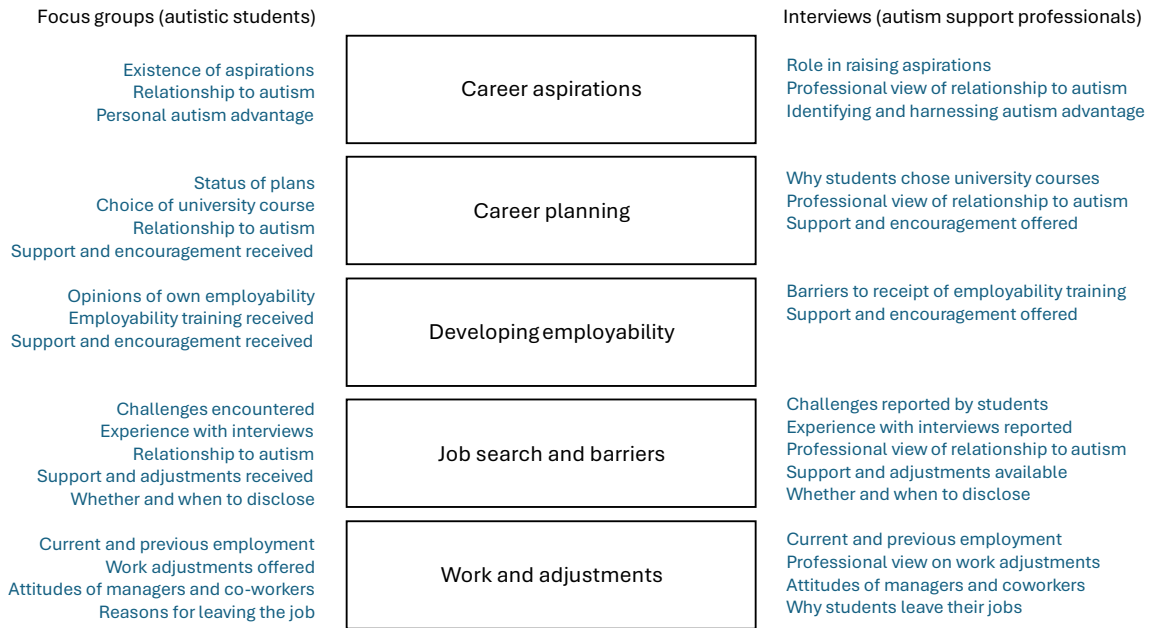
Focus groups (autistic students)

| | Interviews (autism support professionals) |

Existence of aspirations
Relationship to autism
Personal autism advantage

Career aspirations

Role in raising aspirations
Professional view of relationship to autism
Identifying and harnessing autism advantage

Status of plans
Choice of university course
Relationship to autism
Support and encouragement received

Career planning

Why students chose university courses
Professional view of relationship to autism
Support and encouragement offered

Opinions of own employability
Employability training received
Support and encouragement received

Developing employability

Barriers to receipt of employability training
Support and encouragement offered

Challenges encountered
Experience with interviews
Relationship to autism
Support and adjustments received
Whether and when to disclose

Job search and barriers

Challenges reported by students
Experience with interviews reported
Professional view of relationship to autism
Support and adjustments available
Whether and when to disclose

Current and previous employment
Work adjustments offered
Attitudes of managers and co-workers
Reasons for leaving the job

Work and adjustments

Current and previous employment
Professional view on work adjustments
Attitudes of managers and coworkers
Why students leave their jobs

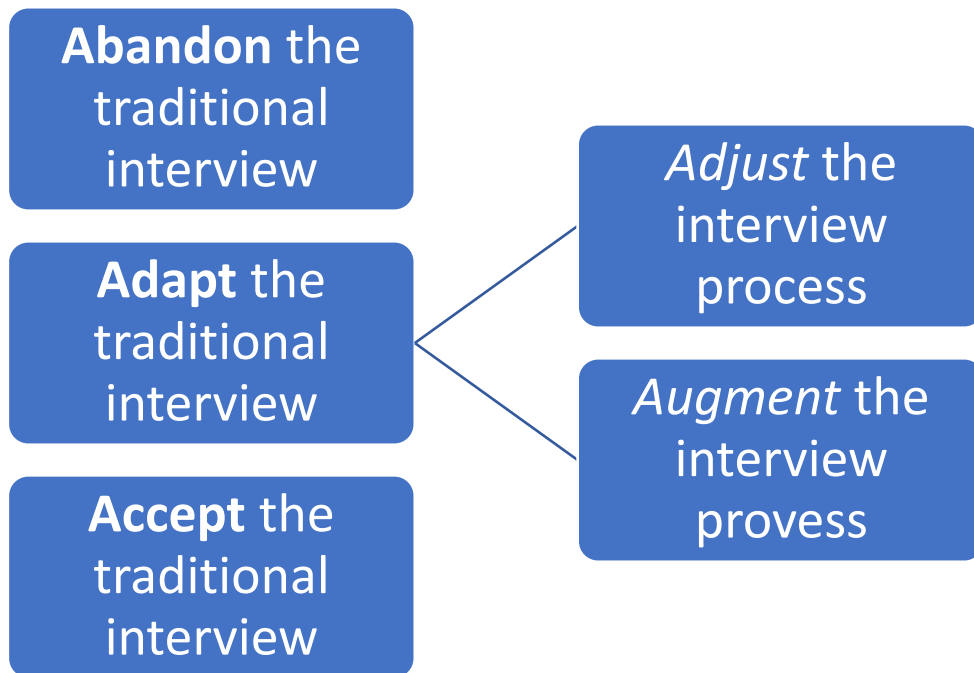**Figure 1:** Question topics used in the interviews and focus groups.

Figure 2: Themes developed in the analysis (5A's framework)

Table 1: Challenges to autistic candidates presented by job interviews

Formality
- Getting to the interview and arriving `punctually.   - Greetings, handshakes, introductions.   - Use of more formal vocabulary.   - Dressing for the interview.
The interview room
- Intimidating/confrontational seating design.   - Environmental conditions, e.g., light, heat, stuffiness, noise.
Forms of questioning
- Interpreting indirect questions.   - Dealing with hypothetical questions.   - Handling multi-part questions   - Facing questions with no 'right' or 'wrong' answer.   - Answer questions while still being honest.
Communication
- How much thinking time is acceptable.   - How long should each answer be.   - How fast or slow to speak.   - Blanking out.   - Understanding jokes and sarcasm.   - Small talk.
Body language
- Making sustained eye contact.   - Facial tics.   - Verbal tics.   - Fiddling with items in hands or pockets.   - Rocking, leg bouncing, etc.
Others
- Finding it hard to concentrate during long interviews.   - Ability to take breaks between activities, or time-outs during them.

Table 2: Potential adjustments to the traditional interview

Employers could consider the following adjustments:
Preparing for the interview: • Provide candidates with the interview questions, • Offer a choice of interview format, e.g., in-person, online, written, • Let candidates know they can bring notes, fidget gadgets, etc. • Inform candidates of your expectations regarding attire.
Getting to the interview: Provide information (including photographs) about: • Travel to the interview location. • Where to report in. • The set-up of the interview room.
Before the interview: • Ensure the waiting room is quiet and airy. • Try to ensure that the interview is on time.
During the interview: • Set up the interview room to avoid visual distractions, e.g., busy artwork. • Make sure the candidate knows the lighting can be adjusted. • Choose a quiet interview room. • Focus questions on the skills needed to do the job. • Be prepared to rephrase questions. • Prompt candidates to give further details if their answer is too short. • Give verbal and non-verbal feedback, e.g., nod when the candidate's answer is on track. • Do not make assumptions based on body language or tone of voice. • Avoid using of humour or sarcasm.
Other assessment techniques: • Ensure that practical tests are relevant to the position for which the candidate has applied. • If a practical task is being set, ensure the candidates have enough time to complete it. • Permit rest breaks between multiple tasks. • Wherever possible use real tasks rather than psychometric tests. • If a computer is to be used, make sure it has the assistive technology candidates may need.

- Ensure any psychometric testing has been tested to make sure it is fair to neurodivergent candidates.

Note: Best practice would be for employers to make such adjustments for all candidates, i.e. universal design. Candidates then do not need to be asked whether they are neurodivergent or have any other disabilities. There will be a 'level playing field' for all.