

**Understanding the impact of impression management, stereotyping and person-job/person-organisation fit on the selection of autistic job applicants**

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# Abstract

Unemployment among autistic people, including graduates, is the highest of all disability groups. Previous research has found that a major barrier to employment is the conventional job interview, which relies on a high level of social skills, since impairment in social functioning is a central feature of autism. Earlier studies have focused primarily on how autistic people might adapt their behaviour in order to succeed. This research used a critical realist approach to examine the influences of impression management, stereotyping and person-job/person-organisation fit on outcomes for autistic job applicants and considered whether alternatives to conventional assessments might be more appropriate. Interviews were conducted with 69 individuals, comprising autistic participants, employers and professional stakeholders.

The thesis provides important contributions to knowledge. The findings challenge Goffman’s theory of presenting an “*idealised*” version of oneself in order to create a good impression at interviews. Instead, autistic applicants were required to adopt a *different* identity - that of the neurotypical candidate - to meet employers’ expectations. The findings also question Goffman’s dramaturgical concept of ‘frontstage’ and ‘backstage’ for autistic people, whose sense of identity and presentation of self were often immutable. The analysis of the recruitment experiences of autistic applicants also contributes toward an advanced understanding of the interaction between the 'social relational model’ and Goffman’s theory of impression management. Further, participants were exposed to a variety of forms of stereotyping. The generative mechanisms that can affect disabled people more generally, such as labour market demands, reliance on AI for candidate selection and austerity measures, negatively impacted on autistic participants. Recommendations for changes to policy and practice include re-evaluation of the algorithm-based tests used to assess person-job and person-organisation fit; the use of work trials, and further employment legislation to prevent discrimination.

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I would also like to acknowledge the assistance of the National Autistic Society and Autistica regarding access to participants. Special thanks are due to all those who participated in the study, particularly autistic contributors, a number of whom found the process challenging but were determined to take part in the belief that research might bring about change. Their past experiences, which were sometimes distressing for them to relate, form the bedrock of the research. I would also like to express my gratitude to my friends and family for their interest and support, especially my husband Richard and son Tom, the inspiration and reason for undertaking this project.

When I set out on this research, my wish was that it would be a springboard for further work that might be undertaken with employers and the autistic community to bring about change in recruitment practices for autistic applicants. I hope these findings prove helpful in that endeavour.

# Declaration

I, Janice Lawler, confirm that this thesis is my own work. I am aware of the University’s Guidance on the Use of Unfair Means ([www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means)). This work has not been presented previously for an award at this, or any other, university.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

This study used a critical realist approach to examine the influences of impression management, stereotyping and person-job/person-organisation fit on outcomes for autistic job applicants and considered whether alternatives to conventional assessments might be more appropriate. Autism is a condition that affects an individual’s perception of the world and their interaction with others (Frith, 1991; Baron-Cohen, 2008). Very high levels of unemployment exist among autistic people, including graduates, despite their express wish to secure a job (Rosenblatt, 2008; National Autistic Society, 2018). The Office for National Statistics reported in 2021 that just 11% of autistic people were in full-time paid employment, and a further 11% in part-time work (ONS, 2021). By contrast, 52% of all disabled, and 81% of non-disabled people, were in employment (Powell, 2021). Furthermore, autistic graduates are the least likely of all disabled graduates to find work, and less than one third of postgraduate research graduates were found to be in full-time employment 15 months after completing their doctorate (Allen and Coney, 2021). Key statistics on the autistic population and employment are given in Table 1 below.

**Table 1 Key data relating to autism in the UK**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Category** | **Percentage** |
| Estimated autistic population1 | 1% |
| Estimated ratio of autistic males/females2  | 3:1 |
| Non-disabled adults in employment3 | 81% |
| Disabled adults in employment3  | 52% |
| A**utistic** adults in employment3 | 22% |
| Graduates in employment3  | 86% |
| **Autistic** graduates in employment3  | 47% |
| Postgraduates in employment3  | 88% |
| **Autistic** postgraduates in employment3  | 76% |

1 (Brugha *et al.*, 2012)

2 (National Autistic Society, no date)

3 (Office for National Statistics, 2021)

Disability is a matter of global concern. The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that approximately 16% of the world’s population experiences significant disability (WHO, 2022). The deprivations experienced by disabled people as a result of their disability range from reduced life expectancy to exclusion from education, discrimination and reduced employment opportunities (Vornholt *et al.*, 2018).The issue of disability and employment has gained increasing global recognition as it is relevant to several key components of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, of which tackling extreme poverty is its primary objective (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2016). The barriers to entering the job market for people with disabilities vary depending on the type of disability encountered. The official data in the UK, for example, show that those with a neurodivergent disability such as autism, epilepsy or ADHD are much less likely to be employed than those with a physical impairment (Adam, Brown and Dong, 2023). Similar findings have been reported in Sweden where it was found that those with a hearing impairment were most likely among the disabled to be employed, while those with psychological disabilities were the least likely to be hired (Boman *et al.*, 2015),

Reasons for tackling the problem of disability and unemployment may be both humanitarian and economic as many European countries are facing a severe decline in the working-age population (European Commission, 2023). The beneficial effect of employment on health and well-being has also been widely documented, particularly as those with a disability may be more isolated. Regular employment is therefore seen as a means of both reducing isolation and poverty (Schur, 2002). An important enabler of job opportunities for disabled people has been the introduction of specific legislation by countries to establish a more inclusive labour market. The majority of European countries has adopted the U.N. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006) that recognises the equal right of disabled people to work. In addition, some countries such as Germany, France, Austria, Poland, Spain and Italy have introduced quotas for people with disabilities. However, there is insufficient data to draw conclusions on the impact of such legislation on the employment status of disabled people. Similarly, anti-discrimination law such as The Americans with Disabilities Act 1990 is designed to protect workers with disabilities, including provision of ‘reasonable accommodations’ in the workplace. However, employers may decline accommodations where they represent ‘undue hardship’ and research indicates that employment levels have not changed since the implementation of the Act (Bjelland and Burkhauser, no date). In Canada, legislation also prohibits discrimination resulting from physical or mental disability with a similar duty to provide reasonable accommodations unless they cause ‘undue hardship’. In spite of human rights legislation, anti-discrimination laws, as well as programmes that offer support, disabled people nevertheless face significant barriers globally in the workplace (Vornholt *et al.*, 2018).

This study focusses on autistic job seekers as they face the highest rates of unemployment of all disabled groups in the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2021). A UK, rather than an international, perspective has been adopted with a view to presenting practical recommendations for changes to recruitment processes. A broader geographic study that would need to address significant differences in, for example, language, culture and legislation was more likely to result in a less cohesive study that would be of less practical application. A key element of the study, for example, was to examine how ‘reasonable adjustments’, as defined in UK legislation, impacted on recruitment outcomes for autistic people, whereas in many countries the right to ‘reasonable adjustments’ does not apply or may be interpreted differently.

Autism is not a mental disorder nor a learning disability. As a spectrum condition, however, there is a wide variation in how it impacts on individuals and the challenges it presents. Typically, autistic job applicants have struggled to navigate the social, cognitive and communication challenges presented by traditional selection processes, and in particular the job interview (Müller *et al.*, 2003; Davies *et al.*, 2023). Specifically, the expected modes of behaviour that have been found to contribute to a successful interview may be a challenge for the autistic candidate due to their innate condition. These behaviours may be verbal, such as fluency of speech, tone of voice and responsiveness to the interviewer, or non-verbal, including eye contact, posture, a firm handshake and what might be regarded as ‘positive’ facial expressions (DeGroot and Kluemper, 2007). In particular, autistic people tend to experience difficulty with ‘Theory of Mind’, which broadly relates to interpreting and predicting other people’s behaviour, making sense of abstract ideas, and imagining situations outside one’s own experience (Wing, 1991; Baron-Cohen, 2008a). This difficulty may manifest itself in job interviews, where there is a degree of hypothetical questioning and candidates are asked how they might behave in a particular scenario (Maras *et al.*, 2021).

In recent years the interview process has posed additional challenges for autistic job seekers with the increased use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) at the preliminary stages of selection (Buranyi, 2018; Dishman, 2018). For these assessments, companies video applicants using software that detects posture, body language and ‘micro expressions’ such as frowning, blinking or smiling (Turner, 2018). This method of selection might be expected to impact adversely on autistic candidates who are likely to perform less well than neurotypical applicants due to attributes related to their condition. In contrast, some employers currently use job-related tasks to assess autistic applicants, rather than the traditional interview, but they are the exception, and such approaches are more likely to be applied by companies targeting IT skills, where autistic people are perceived to perform strongly (Wang, 2014; Higginbottom, 2017; Kemp, 2018).

To date, studies on autistic people’s experience of job interviews have tended to follow the ‘medical model’ of disability, where researchers have identified those areas where autistic individuals fall short of the neurotypical performance expected, and seek to address them (Strickland, Coles and Southern, 2013; Dechsling *et al.*, 2021). These studies have included exercises in enhancing social skills, practice in responding to mock interview questions and training in the perception of non-verbal clues (Burke *et al.*, 2021). Success in these areas remains unproven however, as there is no empirical evidence to date that learned behaviour and responses to set questions can be generalised to normal job interviews with employment outcomes (Nordahl-Hansen *et al.*, 2020; Smith *et al.*, 2021). Critically, there has been little consideration of the possible alternatives to the conventional interview to assess the autistic individual’s suitability for a post. This study therefore seeks to address that gap by exploring with autistic participants, employers and other stakeholders not only the barriers presented by job interviews but also, and perhaps more importantly, alternative forms of assessment that would enable autistic applicants to demonstrate their ability to perform well in the job rather than in the job interview.

Fundamental to the examination of this topic is the degree to which *impression management, stereotyping, person-job fit and person-organisation fit* inform the selection process and influence outcomes for autistic applicants. The first of these – *impression management* – is explored against the background of Goffman’s concept of adaptive presentation that varies according to one’s audience. Goffman used the dramaturgical model to describe human behaviour, differentiating between a ‘front of stage’ performance where one engages with an ‘audience’ – for example a job applicant with a potential employer – and adapts, where necessary, to their cues (Goffman, 1959, p. 32); and ‘backstage’ where one prepares for a ‘performance’ and relaxes afterwards into one’s true nature (Goffman, 1959, p. 114). In a scenario such as a job interview, Goffman argues that there is an expectation that all the participating individuals have an understanding of the ‘social norms’ and are able to enact them (Goffman, 1959). However, given the innate profile of autism and its related difficulties with ‘Theory of Mind’, this study explores the unique position of autistic job seekers in relation to Goffman’s supposition.

1. The study also examines the concept of *stereotyping* as it applies to autistic applicants. The influence of bias in recruiting and selecting job applicants has been widely reported in terms of age, gender and race but much less is known about the impact on those with a disability, including those with autism, which may be less ‘visible’ than some other forms of disability (Lipton *et al.*, 1991; King *et al.*, 2006; Posthuma and Campion, 2009). Moreover, in recent years autism has received much greater, although not necessarily balanced, exposure in the media (Pesonen *et al.*, 2021) with the portrayal of autistic individuals with specific skills or, in some cases, savant syndrome. These perceptions may give rise to views about the suitability of autistic people in the workplace, including the conviction that autistic individuals perform better in certain sectors such as technology, science and the financial sector (Sekiguchi, 2004). This in turn raises the question of the autistic person’s position when assessed by employers in relation to *person-job fit,* where the skills and profile of an applicant are matched against the job specification (Sekiguchi, 2004; Kim, Schuh and Cai, 2020); and *person-organisation fit*, where compatibility of the individual with an organisation’s culture, aims and ethos is the main determinant for hiring (Kristof, 1996; Rivera, 2012). Against this background, the thesis explores the perceptions and experiences of autistic adults regarding different job selection processes, and the observations and understanding of employers and other stakeholders in their assessment of autistic candidates.

The thesis is developed over eight chapters. The literature review is in two parts: chapters 2 and 3. **Chapter 2** examines the literature relating to the nature and prevalence of autism, and factors affecting employment outcomes, including the sectoral distribution of the labour market and the importance of ‘soft’ skills in many industries. The role of the media in influencing attitudes to autistic people in the workplace is also discussed. The impact of the increasing use of technology on the recruitment of autistic candidates is considered, together with the wider implications for other disabled and minority groups. This chapter also reviews previous research on outcomes for autistic job applicants which, while recognising the challenges of the conventional job interview for autistic applicants, tends towards the ‘medical model’ of seeking to change autistic behaviour to meet neurotypical expectations in the recruitment process. It further identifies the gap in the literature regarding the influences of stereotyping and person-job fit and person-organisation fit on employment outcomes for autistic people. Finally, the current legal framework as set out in the Autism Act 2009 and the Equality Act 2010 is examined, together with the government’s strategy in relation to autism and employment.

Chapter 3 forms the second part of the literature review. In this chapter, the theory of impression management, as advanced by Goffman, is examined in the context of autistic individuals undergoing the job interview process, together with the concept of ‘emotional labour’. Further, it addresses the issue of normativity in relation to society’s treatment of neurodivergent individuals, with particular reference to employment. In addition, the ‘medical’, ‘social’ and ‘social relational’ models of disability are discussed alongside Goffman’s theory of impression management. Finally, the chapter draws on both parts of the literature review to develop the conceptual framework that gives rise to the research questions for this thesis.

In **Chapter 4**, the methodology used in the research is discussed. A critical realist approach is adopted and the generative mechanisms that are relevant to the recruitment of autistic job applicants, are identified. These include current labour market demands, the transferable ‘soft’ skills sought by employers, the stereotyping of the autistic condition in the recruitment process, and changes in HR recruitment practices that rely increasingly on technology. Further, it is argued that these mechanisms, while seen primarily through the lens of the autistic job applicant, may apply also to other disabled and minority groups.

Purposive sampling (Bryman and Bell, 2007) was used in the selection of participants, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 69 individuals. These comprised autistic people who had attended job interviews, stakeholders with knowledge of neurodiversity in the workplace – including leading experts in autism and labour market intermediaries – and employers from a variety of sectors with experience of employing autistic personnel. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the qualitative data.

The findings from the semi-structured interviews with participants are recorded in **Chapters 5 and 6** respectively. Against the background of Goffman’s dramaturgical model, **Chapter 5** examines autistic applicants’ understanding of impression management in the context of the job interview, and shows that despite a good understanding of the behaviours expected, they were often disadvantaged by their innate condition when trying to ‘perform’ well in this environment. Critically, they believed that the interview performance obliged them to present an idealised version not of themselves – as suggested by Goffman – but rather a ‘different’identity – that of the neurotypical applicant. Indeed, many autistic participants expressed the view that the ‘face’ of autism was unacceptable to employers and that they needed to project a ‘neurotypical’ identity in both physical appearance and interview responses in order to succeed. Reflecting this, the vast majority of autistic participants favoured a form of work trial that focused on the specific skills needed to perform a job rather than on the social skills demanded by the conventional interview. In their view, such an assessment would also be a better indicator of sustainability of employment as it would afford them the opportunity both to demonstrate the actual competencies needed to perform the job, and their compatibility with the environment. Employers, while generally supportive in theory of a form of work trial - and recognising it was a more effective form of assessment – felt constrained in some cases by budgetary considerations or employment practices, particularly in the public sector.

**Chapter 6** explores findings relating to the impact of stereotyping on job outcomes for autistic applicants. It reveals the influences of the media in its portrayal of the condition in recent years, and the resultant preconceptions (either positive or negative) that were held about the suitability of autistic people in the workplace. The findings show that autistic job applicants had been exposed to a range of stereotyping, with common misconceptions that autistic people are invariably male, lack a sense of humour, have learning difficulties or, conversely, are ‘gifted’ in some respect. In extreme cases there appeared also to be a comprehensive ‘transference’ of traits and characteristics, whereby neurotypical individuals who had some experience of an autistic individual assumed that all autistic people would demonstrate exactly the same attributes, strengths and weaknesses, irrespective of age, gender or background. In general, employers reported that they had guidelines in place to counter possible stereotyping but acknowledged that much depended on the individual interviewer, and that it was not possible to guarantee that stereotyping would not enter into the selection panel’s assessment of autistic applicants. Furthermore, where the initial stages of recruitment were outsourced, employers did not monitor the selection methods applied by the agencies they contracted. Employers acknowledged the complexity of the autistic condition and in some instances expressed their willingness to make the interview process more accessible for autistic people but were unsure what precise steps to take.

**Chapter 6** then moves on to examine the interrelationship between stereotyping and the theory of person-job fit, where the skills and profile of an applicant are matched against the job specification, and that of person-organisation fit, where compatibility of the individual with an organisation’s culture, aims and ethos is the main determinant for hiring. The aims of this section of the chapter were twofold: firstly, to explore the degree to which autistic applicants considered the detailed nature of the job and the culture of an organisation when applying for jobs, and secondly, the impact that any stereotyping by employers might have on their views regarding the suitability of an autistic applicant to a particular post or to their organisation.

In relation to person-job fit, two specific areas were examined that autistic job applicants found challenging in the early stages of the application process and which hampered their ability to decide whether they were a good ‘job-fit’: the job description and Situational Judgement Tests (SJTs), which are a form of psychometric testing. In the case of the former, many autistic participants cited job descriptions as one of the barriers to applying for positions as the often lengthy, jargon-laden documents made it difficult for them to understand the competencies required for the job. Consequently, their decision as to whether they were a good ‘job-fit’ was hindered by the inaccessibility of the document. A number of employers acknowledged that their job descriptions required greater clarity in some respects and failed to spell out the essentials of the post. The increased use of online SJTs to gauge the suitability of job applicants for a particular position was also a major disadvantage for those on the autism spectrum, given the hypothetical nature of the exercises. These assessments, which are commonly used in the preliminary stages of selection, require candidates to consider a series of workplace scenarios that they might encounter in the role for which they have applied, and to judge how they would respond to a particular dilemma. They are used by many employers as the first level of assessment, and those who fail are unable to proceed with their application. A number of organisations in this study relied on them for reducing applications to a ‘manageable’ number but some employers questioned their ultimate effectiveness in selecting the best candidates.

In the broader context of person-job fit, most employers did not exclude the possibility of hiring autistic people in different capacities but spoke of certain jobs to which they believed autistic employees were well ‘fitted’ such as banking, insurance and financial services. Whilst this endorsement might be of benefit to autistic people seeking employment in these sectors, it was nevertheless a source of frustration to those applying for jobs in the creative, teaching and caring professions who felt that their competencies in these areas were less well recognised, and indeed questioned by employers, reinforcing the stereotyping to which they had been exposed. Regarding person-organisation fit, most autistic participants reflected on whether they would ‘fit in’ with an organisation before applying for a job but had differing views on whether a particular sector – public, private or third – would be more positive in their attitude to autistic candidates. While for some the public sector was the preferred option, for others the private sector was seen to operate more flexibly in their approach to assessment. Labour market intermediaries, who were experienced in supporting autistic job seekers into employment, argued that the organisational culture of an entity, rather than the sector in which it operated, was key to whether an autistic individual would ‘fit in’. In this context ‘culture’ was interpreted more as the day-to-day management and ambience of the work environment rather than the declared goals and guiding principles of an organisation. The use of AI to screen candidates in the early stages of the application process raised a number of serious concerns regarding the fairness of this method of selection for autistic applicants. The algorithms used derive from data drawn from neurotypical candidates and, more specifically, from ‘ideal’ employees that an organisation is seeking to replicate. As the detailed components of the software are bespoke and unavailable to applicants, it is not possible for autistic candidates to request ‘reasonable adjustments’ that would create a more level playing field when undergoing this form of assessment.

The discussion chapter (**Chapter 7**) brings together the research findings of **Chapters 5 and 6** against the background of existent knowledge. The resultant analysis indicates that autistic people, compared with their neurotypical counterparts, face a range of systemic and, arguably, discriminatory barriers to employment in respect of impression management, stereotyping, person-job and person-organisation fit. Some employers were found to have certain expectations of autistic applicants’ abilities or limitations, relying on media accounts or limited exposure to an individual with the same condition. Most importantly, employers in general continue to rely on performance at job interviews rather than in job-related tasks or work trials to assess job fitness. Consequently, autistic candidates are judged on their performance in a skill set in which, by the nature of their disability, they are disadvantaged and unable to project the ‘idealised’ image to which Goffman refers. In addition, it is argued that the generative mechanisms, such as the sectoral distribution of the labour market, austerity measures and the greater use of technology in the HR selection process that impacted on the recruitment of autistic candidates, may be applied to other groups that fall within the categories for whom EDI strategies are intended.

**Chapter 8** concludes the thesis. It outlines the key contributions to theory and existent knowledge and explains how the traditional job interview, with its emphasis on social skills and neurotypical behaviour, is a major barrier for autistic people seeking employment, given their difficulties in social communication and interaction. A more equitable assessment – to which most participants in the study subscribed – was some form of job-based task or work trial that assessed their competencies in the job rather than their interview skills. The limitations of the study and the scope for further research, including in other countries, are examined, together with positionality and reflexivity in the conduct of the research. Finally, the study suggests changes to policy and practice to address the current barriers to employment for autistic people, and possibly other disability and minority groups, who are seeking to enter the job market.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review (Part 1)

## 2.1 Introduction

This is the first of two chapters on the literature review. Part 1 examines the practical challenges facing autistic job seekers, drawing on both international and domestic studies to illustrate the wider relevance of the subject before proceeding to a more detailed examination of recruitment practices and societal attitudes that impact on autistic job applicants in the UK. Part 2 (Chapter 3) develops the theoretical aspects of the study by examining further the ‘social model’ and ‘social relational model’ of disability alongside Goffman’s ideas in relation to impression management. From these two chapters the theoretical framework and research questions are developed.

Early research on autism has centred predominantly on the aetiology of the condition, along with some early intervention programmes for young children (Hurlbutt and Chalmers, 2004). Much less has been written on interventions and outcomes for adults, particularly in relation to employment and job interviews (Pellicano *et al*., 2014). In the last decade however, more literature has appeared, examining specific interventions designed to make autistic adults more ‘employable’ (Hedley *et al.*, 2017; Scott *et al.*, 2018; Smith *et al.*, 2021). These studies have mainly targeted modifications to autistic traits, particularly in social communication skills, in order to achieve a more ‘neurotypical’ presentation to interviewers.

An important consideration when conducting research of this nature is the language of disability, and the risk as a non-autistic person of using ableist language that is perceived as negative or patronising towards the autistic population. This aspect is discussed in **2.2**, together with literature on the nature, prevalence and gender balance of autism (**2.3**). Section **2.4** examines the research on employment outcomes for autistic adults and analyses the factors that affect their employability against the background of the UK labour market. Fundamental to the success of job applicants are certain modes of behaviour that are well documented in the literature. The challenges these present for the autistic individual – given their clinical profile – are analysed in **2.5**. An essential requirement in today’s job market – the demonstration of ‘soft’ skills – is examined in **2.6**, along with the consequences for autistic job applicants.

The position of the autistic job applicant is further examined in relation to the literature on stereotyping (**2.7**). The perception of autism has changed significantly in the last decade, influenced to some extent by the portrayal in the media of autistic individuals with specific skills or, in some cases, savant syndrome. This section therefore addresses the socio-cultural context in relation to the role of the media in forming public perceptions of autistic people. Perceptions may extend to a conviction that autistic individuals are suited to certain jobs, particularly in the field of technology. As part of the examination of stereotyping, therefore, the study also assesses the literature in relation to person-job fit, where the main requirement is to fulfil the job description, and person-organisation fit, where the employer aims for compatibility between an employee and the organisation (**2.7.2**) (Sekiguchi, 2004).

A notable development in research in recent years has been the use of assistive technology to prepare autistic applicants for job interviews. The effectiveness of these programmes, and their adherence to the ‘medical model’ of viewing autistic behaviour as an ‘impairment’ that requires correction in order to gain acceptance in the job market (Scott *et al*., 2018) is also discussed (**2.8**). In addition, the implications for autistic candidates of recent algorithm-based selection procedures, which are based on neurotypical behaviour, are examined in **2.9,** together with the wider implications forEquality, Diversity and Inclusion. Finally, section **2.10** reviews the current legal framework and government policies that apply to autistic job applicants.

As noted above, the corpus of academic literature in relation to recruitment and autism is somewhat limited, although increasing in recent years, but there is a growing awareness in journalism and the wider media of the autistic condition. This literature review has therefore included, where appropriate, media articles and commentaries that report autistic adults’ reflections on their efforts to enter the job market. In addition, there is now a small but growing body of academic researchers with autism. Their views have been drawn upon, where relevant, as those best placed to convey the lived experiences and barriers that they encounter in a neurotypical world.

## 2.2 The language of disability and autism

An important consideration when conducting research of this nature is the language of disability, and the risk as a non-autistic person of using ableist language that is perceived as negative or patronising by those on the autism spectrum (Bottema-Beutel *et al.*, 2021). Language evolves and is closely linked to the cultural climate in which it is used – hence a word such as ‘spastic' which in its origin had a clear, etymological basis for describing the condition of cerebral palsy and was applied without negative overtones until the late twentieth century, is now regarded as crude and offensive in the United Kingdom, although not in the United States, where it does not have the same connotations (Flanagan, 2017). Some supporters of the ‘social model’ favour an ‘identity-first’ approach when referring to disability, using the term ‘disabled people’ to signify that such individuals are the victims of society’s barriers, rather than ‘person-first’ language such as ‘people with disabilities’ which may indicate elected ownership of the condition. ‘Identity-first’ terminology has gained traction in recent years but nevertheless has its dissenters (Bottema-Beutel *et al.*, 2021). Some – like the campaigners for the use of ‘person-first’ language *–* argue that the emphasis on ‘disabled’ rather than ‘people’ encourages society to see individuals through the lens of their ‘impairment’ rather than as ‘normal’ people functioning with an impairment (Blaska, 1993).

Research by the National Autistic Society (NAS), in conjunction with the Royal College of GPs and the UCL Institute of Education, examined the terms that should be applied to people with autism. They surveyed autistic adults; parents of children and adults on the autism spectrum; professionals and extended family and friends. Their findings showed that no single term was preferred, and preferences varied among the different groups (Kenny *et al.*, 2016). Terms that gained the greatest approval from autistic adults were *“Asperger Syndrome”* (a form of autism where there is no learning disability) and *“Aspie”* (Kenny *et al.*, 2016, p. 446), although the latter was positively disliked by the other groups (Kenny *et al.*, 2016, p. 447). Significantly, autistic adults did not object to any of the terminology: descriptions such as “*person with autism*”, “*autistic person*” and “*on the autism spectrum*” received a positive endorsement; and others “*Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD*)”, “*high-functioning autism*”, and “*Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC)*” were “*neither liked or disliked*” (Kenny *et al.*, 2016, p. 446).

As the literature indicates, language preferences evolve and vary even among contemporary individuals. The term ‘Asperger Syndrome’, which was named after the Austrian paediatrician, Hans Asperger, has now fallen into disrepute among some of the autistic community following recent (contested) allegations concerning Asperger’s involvement in the Nazi eugenics programme (Furfaro, 2018). ‘Asperger Syndrome’ is also less likely to be used in the future as, following revisions to the clinical classification of autism in 2013, it is no longer a separate diagnostic category but rather is subsumed in the broader classification of ‘Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)’ (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Others, however, object to the use of ‘disorder’ which has a negative connotation and prefer ‘Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC)’ which, they argue, recognises both the ‘disabling’ aspects of autism and its strengths in areas such as non-social skills (Baron-Cohen, 2008a).

In recognition of the fact that no one term is favoured by those in the autistic community, the study will aim to respect the wishes of the majority by referring to ‘Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC’), ‘autistic people’, and in an historical context (and where participants continue to self-identify with the terms) ‘high-functioning autism’ and ‘Asperger Syndrome’.

## 2.3 The nature and prevalence of autism

### 2.3.1 The nature of autism

Autism is a complex neurodevelopmental condition that is generally characterised by difficulties in social communication and highly restricted interests or repetitive behaviours (Lord *et al.*, 2020; Pellecchia *et al.*, 2021). Although the aetiology of autism remains unclear, there is now significant evidence that genetic rather than environmental factors are the main determinant of the condition (King and Bearman, 2011; Bai *et al.*, 2019). The heterogeneity of autism, which includes both non-verbal individuals with profound learning disabilities as well as those who are ‘high- functioning’ with normal or above normal intelligence means that autistic people experience their daily life in different ways (Noterdaeme, Wriedt and Höhne, 2010; Mai, 2019; Pellecchia *et al.*, 2021). Typically, however, they struggle with everyday social contact and events, have a more literal understanding of language, and may display a lack of social awareness, particularly in their directness of speech (Frith, 1991).

Some autistic people also exhibit repetitive behaviours and have a highly developed sense of their environment where light, smell, sound and crowds may cause anxiety (Hwang *et al.*, 2020; Williams, Suzman and Woynaroski, 2021). Although anxiety is not itself designated a core feature of autism, the literature shows that *“anxiety disorders are substantially more common in autism than in the general population”* (Crawford and Cottell, 2018, p. 6); and elevated rates of anxiety found in those on the autism spectrum may give rise in turn to hypersensitivity and repetitive behaviours (Hwang *et al*., 2020). With recent phenomenological accounts of the experiences of autistic adults, it is also apparent that an awareness of their differences from neurotypical adults, and a desire not to offend by their behaviour, may be a further source of chronic apprehension and fatigue (Howes, 2014; Kurchak, 2018). The lack of social skills and directness of manner have in the past been interpreted as a lack of empathy and inability to form close relationships. More recent research, however, has found that *“…autistic people are capable of, and interested in, having friendships and romantic relationships”* and, indeed, that *“autistic people who have a romantic partner or best friend rate these relationships as closer than their non-autistic counterparts”* (Sedgewick, Leppanen and Tchanturia, 2019, p. 10).

The most common traits identified in autistic people are known as the *“triad of impairments”* (Wing and Gould, 1979; Wing, 1991, p. 102) which describe the areas that tend to pose the greatest difficulty for those with the condition:

* *social communication* – including with colleagues and family; literal interpretation; understanding facial expressions and tone of voice (for example, humour or sarcasm), body language and proprioception (a sense of the relative position of one’s body to others);
* *social interaction –* for example, shaking hands and maintaining eye contact in conversation; observing and understanding other people’s reactions in order to moderate one’s behaviour, effectively communicating with others, including expressing one’s feelings to others; and
* *social imagination –* interpreting and predicting other people’s behaviour by ‘putting oneself in other people’s shoes’ (i.e. ‘Theory of Mind’); making sense of abstract ideas; and imagining situations outside one’s own experience.

Whilst the above is the accepted diagnostic assessment of the condition, it is important to note the growing body of literature where autistic people express the view that autism is not a disability but rather a different set of skills, and an alternative perception of the world (Bottema-Beutel *et al*., 2021). Indeed, in some cases, it is argued that it is neurotypical people who exhibit poor communication as they lack clarity and candour in their speech by using metaphor, inference, flattery or deception. Neurotypical persons may also make assumptions not based in fact, and are offended when they receive direct and accurate feedback, particularly in the workplace (Iceton, 2018). An emerging group of autistic researchers has also spoken of the benefits conferred by their autistic qualities, including *“long periods of concentration (hyperfocus) and attention to detail, leading to creative thinking and detailed knowledge of topic areas that are of interest to the individual”* (Grant and Kara, 2021, p. 1). Elsewhere, autistic individuals have spoken of their *“good memory and creativity”* as well as personal qualities such as *“honesty”* and *“loyalty”* (Russell *et al.*, 2019, p. 124).

### 2.3.2 The prevalence of autism

There are no official figures for the prevalence of autism in adults in the United Kingdom. The Department for Work and Pensions, which is responsible for supporting people with a disability, reportedly follows a ‘social’ rather than a ‘medical model’, “*focusing on individual needs rather than diagnostic labels*” (National Audit Office, 2009, p. 5). As a consequence, the Department does not systematically collect data on autistic individuals in receipt of support or benefits. Nor are there any official data on the numbers of autistic people who do not claim state benefits. To date there has been one study, conducted in two parts, to determine the autistic population. In 2007, the Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey, which monitors mental health in England, found that 1% of the population in households had autism (Brugha *et al.*, 2009). A later Department of Health study, which surveyed previously excluded groups – such as those in residential care and with more profound learning disabilities – found that approximately 1.1% of the population in England were autistic (Brugha *et al.*, 2012). According to government statistics, the estimated UK population in mid-2021 was 67 million which would equate to some 737,000 autistic people, based on Brugha *et al*.’s findings (Office for National Statistics, 2022). No official data are collected on the proportion of autistic people with an intellectual disability, and estimates vary from one third (Iemmi, Knapp and Ragan, 2017) to two-fifths (Buescher *et al.*, 2014) to one half (National Autistic Society, no date a).

Significant variations also exist in the estimation of gender balance in autism. Indeed, Asperger originally stated that females do not have the condition, although he later revised his opinion (National Autistic Society, no date c). The literature also distinguishes between children and adults with autism, and those with and without a learning disability. Wing (1981) found a ratio of 15:1 male/female (adults and children) in ‘high-functioning’ autistic people, compared with approximately 2:1 (male/female) in those with learning disabilities (Wing, 1981). By contrast, Brugha et *al*.’s survey (2009) found a ratio of 9:1 autistic men and boys to women and girls. More recently, the National Autistic Society reported in 2015 a ratio of 3:1 men to women for their adult services, compared with approximately 5:1 boys to girls in their schools for autistic children (National Autistic Society, no date c), indicating later diagnosis of females. There are no data available for non-binary autistic people, although a recent study reported that people who do not identify with the sex they were assigned at birth are three to six times as likely to be autistic as the general population (Warrier *et al.*, 2020).

Under-diagnosis, late diagnosis or misdiagnosis of autism in females may be explained by a *“unique phenotype”* whereby females *“camouflage”* or *“mask”* their autistic nature (Corbett *et al.*, 2020, p. 127) by *“pretending to be normal”* (Bargiela, Steward and Mandy, 2016, p. 1; see also Tubío-Fungueiriño *et a*l., 2021). Typically, autistic females display a greater facility for forming neurotypical friendships than do autistic males, and are less likely to display behavioural problems associated with the condition (Head, McGillivray and Stokes, 2014; Sedgewick *et al.*, 2016). This analysis would in turn explain Wing’s estimate of 15:1 male/female for ‘high-functioning’ autistic people, and 2:1 male/female for those with ‘learning disabilities’ since ‘high-functioning’ females would be better able to ‘mirror’ neurotypical social behaviour than would those with learning disabilities (Wing,1981). The ‘neurotypical’ presentation adopted by many autistic females, however, may conceal their true mental state and give rise to eating disorders, depression and anxiety (Mandy *et al.*, 2012; Beck *et al.*, 2020; Hirvikoski *et al.*, 2020). Generally, those who engage in camouflaging or masking over a sustained period are prone to poorer mental health with higher levels of stress (Cage and Troxell-Whitman, 2019). Incidence of suicidal behaviour is also reportedly eight times higher among autistic females than those without autism (Kõlves *et al.*, 2021).

## 2.4 Employment outcomes for autistic adults

***2.4.1 The UK labour market***

Employment outcomes for autistic adults must be seen against the background of the current labour market, and in particular the sectoral distribution of employment. The latter illustrates the areas in which job opportunities are likely to arise and is therefore an indication of the particular skills sought by employers. The distribution of employment in the UK is classified according to three main sectors: primary (mainly agriculture and mining), secondary (mainly manufacturing and construction); and tertiary (services). Historically, there have been significant and consistent changes in the deployment of labour since the second world war. **Table 2** below illustrates the trends in the last seventy years, where there has been a clear decline in the primary and secondary sectors, contrasted with a sharp increase in the tertiary sector. As a consequence, over four out of five workers in the UK are currently engaged in the service industries.

**Table 2 Percentage distribution of the labour force 1948-2022**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 1948 | 1985 | 2018 |
| Primary | 9 | 3 | 2 |
| Secondary | 37 | 28 | 16 |
| Tertiary | 54 | 69 | 83 |
| Total Labour Force | 100 | 100 | 101\* |

* Due to statistical rounding

Source: ONS, 2019

The tertiary sector includes services such as retail, the financial sector, the public sector, business administration, hospitality, leisure and cultural activities. Retail and the wholesale trade (13%), together with health and social care (13%) account for over a quarter of all jobs in the UK (Panjwani, 2023). The changes in the distribution of jobs are the result of a combination of factors, including developments in technology, social changes and industrial structure. It is not possible to predict what further changes will materialise as a result of, for example, the rapid growth in Artificial Intelligence but for the foreseeable future it is expected that the largest proportion of UK workers will continue to be employed in the tertiary sector (Office for National Statistics, 2019). There are no official data on the types of employment in which autistic people are engaged. It is known that certain employers in the field of technology, finance and engineering, for example, hire autistic employees because of their perceived strengths in attention to detail, logical thinking and exceptional memory (Feinstein, 2018). While these reflect a rather stereotypical view of autism, and individuals with the condition have proved successful in a wide range of industries, including the arts and creative sector (Feinstein, 2018), employers have been less likely to recruit autistic employees in traditional ‘customer services’ where ‘soft’ skills are viewed as an important element of the job.

***2.4.2 ‘Soft’ skills in the labour market***

The predominance of the tertiary sector in UK employment means that autistic applicants are seeking to enter the job market at a time when employers place great importance on ‘soft’ skills. These have been variously interpreted in the literature but are generally considered to relate to social or interpersonal skills, such as effective communication, and an aptitude for teamwork (Hurrell, 2016). The need for ‘soft’ skills alongside technical and applied knowledge has been referenced increasingly in the literature since the early part of this century (Handel, 2003; Lloyd and Payne, 2009). Felstead acknowledged the growing significance of these particular skills in the service industries where workers were required to “*manage their own feelings and ... the feelings of others”* *(‘emotional skills’),* as well as *“look the part”* and *“sound the part’” (“aesthetic skills”)* (Felstead, 2006, p 27).

The importance of such skills in the recruitment of front-line retail work was confirmed in a survey of Manchester clothing, footwear and leather goods retailers where employers expressed a firm preference for ‘soft’ skills, rather than qualifications, when recruiting entry level employees (Nickson *et al.*, 2012). The research concluded that “*qualifications … may only be one, arguably, marginal component of providing for employability … in the (retail) industry*” (Nickson *et al.*, 2012, p. 69), and that in front line service work there was “*an increasing recognition of the primacy of soft skills*” (Nickson *et al.*, 2012, p. 79). Similarly, in their survey of retail employers, Bunt *et al.* (2005) found that the key skills required in new recruits for sales and retail assistants, retail cashiers and checkout operator jobs were self-presentation, verbal communications and interpersonal and team work skills.

The emphasis on ‘soft’ skills appears to extend to all levels of recruitment: while government policy has in recent decades tended to emphasise the importance of qualifications in enhancing employability, and students have been encouraged to enter further and higher education, employers have placed increasing importance on transferable skills (Lewis and Bolton, 2023). A study from Indeed (an online employment website), for example, found in 2022 that three-quarters (74 %) of employers were less interested in university degrees than a decade ago (CIPD, 2022b). Reasons for this include a belief that current work practices and systems rely on greater teamworking (Vincent, 2011), for which ‘soft’ skills are an essential element, as well as for effective leadership and management (Riggio *et al.*, 2003). Brown and Hesketh (2004, p 35) argue that employers value “*hard currencies*” such as qualifications and work experience, and “*soft currencies*” such as personal skills and appearance but that “’*who you are’ matters as much as ‘what you know’*”.

There is evidence that this approach extends also to international job markets. A European study of four participating countries (United Kingdom, Slovenia, Austria and Romania) found that alongside ‘hard’ business knowledge, employers wanted graduates with key transferable skills considered necessary to operate effectively in management and leadership roles. These included: the ability to cope with uncertainty and to work under pressure; and to communicate and interact with others, either in teams or through networking (Andrews and Higson, 2008). Such were the requirements of employers in relation to graduate skills, that business schools were encouraged to develop programmes in which undergraduates might develop their ‘softer’ communication, acknowledging that advanced levels of business knowledge alone were not sufficient (Andrews and Higson, 2008).

The literature also raises the issue of class in respect of ‘soft’ skills. It has been argued that the aesthetic attributes sought in employees who ‘look and sound the part’ are not found equally across the social spectrum (Nickson *et al.*, 2012). Hence employers in the service industries have been accustomed to recruit from the more middle-class student population than, for example, the long-term unemployed. Indeed, the latter appear to judge themselves as lacking the appropriate skills to perform well in this type of occupation (Nickson *et al.,* 2012). Hurrell (2022) argues further that the very description of ‘soft’ skills may be misleading as what employers are actually seeking are ‘positive attitudes' and a certain compliance rather than particular skills. As such, there may be a risk of exploitation, particularly with new entrants, if they are required to work excessive hours to demonstrate commitment, or receive inadequate support and training from employers.

Against this background it may be seen that autistic applicants would in many cases struggle to meet the criteria expected of recruits with regard to ‘soft’ skills. Their difficulty with communication and sometimes literal interpretation are likely to disadvantage them when competing for more junior posts, while at more senior levels, they would be less likely to demonstrate the interpersonal and networking skills required for such positions.

***2.4.3* *The number of autistic adults in employment***

As explained in the following subsections, employment outcomes for autistic adults, including graduates, are poor. The literature indicates a clear pattern of low levels of employment, often in entry level or unskilled work, with regular periods of unemployment for those who do obtain jobs at some stage. Reasons cited for their failure to obtain or sustain a job include poor interviewing skills, difficulties in judging social situations in the workplace and requiring greater supervision than other employees (Farley *et al.*, 2018).

Until 2021, no government data were collected on the number of autistic adults in paid work in the United Kingdom. The literature relied instead on a 2016 online survey of 2,080 autistic individuals conducted by the National Autistic Society (NAS) from which they estimated that about 16% of autistic people were in full-time paid employment, and a further 16% were in some form of part-time work. In February 2021, however, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) published employment data that for the first time included the autistic population as a separate category (Office for National Statistics, 2021). This showed lower levels of employment than reported by the NAS, with just 11% of autistic people in full-time paid employment, and a further 11% in part-time work. By contrast, 52% of all disabled people, and 81 % of those who were not disabled, were in employment (Powell, 2021).

These findings support data collected by a longitudinal study in the United States that examined post-secondary school employment outcomes for young disabled people. Researchers found that employment rates for those on the autism spectrum were always significantly lower than those for all other disabled groups. For example, ten years after leaving school, just 53% of autistic individuals had obtained paid work at any point in their working life, compared with 62% of those with learning disabilities and 80% of those with speech and language impairment (Roux *et al.*, 2013). More recently, research into the outcomes for 2018 disabled UK graduates found that *“autistic graduates were the least likely of all disabled graduates to be in employment”* (Allen and Coney, 2021, p. 42), with the highest unemployment level at postgraduate level. Some 15 months after their doctorate, just under one third of postgraduate (research) graduates were in full-time employment[[1]](#footnote-1). Where autistic individuals were employed, it was more likely to be in a temporary or voluntary capacity and in work that was not commensurate with their qualifications (Allen and Coney, 2021).

Autistic people nevertheless express a desire to work: in the NAS survey conducted in 2016, over three-quarters of respondents who were unemployed said they wanted a job (National Autistic Society, 2018); and studies of ‘high-functioning’ autistic individuals confirm they want regular, challenging work consistent with their abilities (Eaves and Ho, 2008; Baldwin, Costley and Warren, 2014). In their study on the autistic community’s priorities for future autism research, Pellicano, Dinsmore and Charman (2014) found that employment was ranked very highly, and Neary *et al.* (2015, p. 18) reported that parents of young adults with ‘high-functioning’ autism “*rated employment support as the greatest priority for their children”* (Pellicano, Dinsmore and Charman, 2014; Neary, Gilmore and Ashburner, 2015).

### 2.4.4 Studies on employment outcomes for autistic adults

As noted above, official figures on the employment levels of autistic people have only been available since 2021 but the literature includes a number of overseas studies on outcomes for autistic individuals with no intellectual disability, generally defined as an IQ of 70 or above. Until 2013, when the American Psychiatric Association revised its definition of autism to Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or Autistic Spectrum Condition (ASC), these individuals had a diagnosis of ‘high-functioning autism’ or ‘Asperger Syndrome’. **Table 3** below summarises a number of studies drawn from the United States, Canada, Denmark and Australia showing the employment outcomes for this category of people.

**Table 3: Studies on Employment Outcomes for Adults with ‘High Functioning Autism’ or ‘Asperger Syndrome’**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Name** | **Country** | **Sample size** | ***Age of participants*** | **IQ range** | **Employment** **outcome****number (%)** | **Notes** |
| Rumsey, Rapoport and Sceery (1985) | United States | 9 | 18 to 39  | 80 or over | 4 (44%) | Rumsey, Rapoport and Sceery (1985) identified nine ‘high-functioning’ individuals in his sample of fourteen autistic participants; outcomes relate to this subset. |
| Szatmari *et al.* (1989) | Canada | 16 | Mean age 26  | 68 to 110 | 7 (44%) |  |
| Venter, Lord and Schopler (1992) | Canada | 22 | 18 plus | Mean 89 | 3 (14%)  | 22 is the number of participants aged 18 or over at the time of the follow-up study. In addition, 13 participants were “*in sheltered employment, supervised employment or special school programs*” (Venter, Lord and Schopler, 1992, p. 501). |
| Larsen and Mouridsen (1997) | Denmark | 14 | Mean age 38  | 71 or over | 3 (22%) | Larsen and Mouridsen (1997, p. 184) identified 14 individuals of “*normal or nearly normal intelligence*” in their sample of eighteen autistic participants; outcomes relate to this subset.  |
| Farley *et al.* (2009) | United States | 41 | 22 to 46 | Mean 89 | 25 (61%) |  |
| Neary, Gilmore and Ashburner (2015) | Australia | 95 | 15 to 27  | Not given. Described as “*high-functioning ASD*” (Neary, Gilmore and Ashburner, 2015, p. 4) | 46 (48%) | The participants in this study were parents of autistic children who provided data on their offspring via a questionnaire. |
| Coleman and Adams (2018) | Arizona State, USA | 169 | 18-45+(of whom 56% were 18-24) | Not given but the vast majority had completed high school, college or university | 76 (45%) | An additional 27 (16%) were in college/high school /vocational programmes.According to participants, the major barriers to employment were being unable to get past interviews (59%) and not knowing what jobs to apply for (39%).  |

It should be noted that the definition of ‘employment outcome’ varies in these studies. In the case of Szatmari *et al*. (1989), for example, all seven individuals were in full-time, paid employment, including a librarian, teacher and two salesmen; similarly, Rumsey, Rapoport and Sceery (1985), refer to four individuals in competitive, albeit low-paid jobs (Rumsey, Rapoport and Sceery, 1985; Szatmari *et al.*, 1989). Farley *et al.* (2009), on the other hand, report eleven full-time and eleven part-time paid workers in (unspecified) independent jobs. In addition, they include three individuals in supported employment, where individuals were helped into competitive employment without the need for interviews or assessment, and received continuing support from a job coach. In the case of Venter, Lord and Schopler (1992), there is no disaggregation of thirteen study participants who were in “*sheltered or supervised employment, or special school programs”* (Venter, Lord and Schopler, 1992, p. 501)*.*

Despite the lack of granularity in a number of these studies, the literature clearly indicates a pattern of low levels of employment, often in entry level or unskilled work, with regular periods of unemployment for those who did obtain jobs at some stage (Howlin *et al.*, 2004; Chen *et al.*, 2015). ‘Underemployment’ (where the job is not commensurate with their skills or is for fewer hours than they would wish) and ‘malemployment’ (where individuals are in jobs to which they are ill-suited) are common among those with ‘high-functioning’ autism (Feldman, 1996; Romoser, 2000; McKee-Ryan and Harvey, 2011). Finding they are unable to obtain jobs that match their qualifications or particular area of expertise, autistic people may accept less challenging work, for example, in the retail or hospitality industries, where traditionally jobs have been more plentiful but are generally less well suited to them due to the demand for ‘soft’ skills (Romoser, 2000; Müller *et al.*, 2003; Taylor and Seltzer, 2011; Hillier and Galizzi, 2014).

### 2.4.5 Factors affecting employment outcomes

A common finding in the literature was that whilst autistic people in employment tended to have a higher IQ than other autistic participants in the studies, results were variable; and actual levels of employment fell well below those for the non-autistic population with an equivalent IQ (Gillberg and Steffenburg, 1987; Howlin *et al.*, 2004). This corresponds with the finding that autistic adults *“consistently show prominent peaks and troughs on standard IQ assessments”* (Scheuffgen *et al.*, 2000, p. 84); and “*estimates from intelligence quotient alone are an imprecise proxy for functional abilities when diagnosing autism spectrum disorder, particularly for those without intellectual disability*” (Alvares *et al.*, 2020, p. 221). This may be illustrated by a study of mid-life outcomes for a group of 62 autistic individuals. Thirty-eight had full- or part-time jobs and showed a range of cognitive and functional ability, with ten scoring below 70. However, five of the 24 who were unemployed and for whom IQ data were available, had an IQ score of 80 or higher (Farley *et al.,* 2018).

According to carers and support staff of the unemployed, reasons for their failure to obtain or sustain a job included poor interviewing skills, difficulty in judging social situations in the workplace and requiring greater supervision than other employees (Farley *et al.*, 2018). Even at graduate and postgraduate level, employment outcomes for autistic applicants are poor: Allen and Coney (2021) found that just 36% of autistic graduates with a first degree were in full-time employment 15 months after graduating. As important as an individual’s IQ in determining their employment outcome, is the autistic person’s appreciation of the *“social context”* (Lotter, 1974, p. 29), or the *“unwritten rules”* of the workplace (Richards, 2012, p. 638). Similarly, Roux *et al.* (2013, p. 931) found that *“better conversational abilities or functional skills”* were important factors in determining employment outcomes for those on the autism spectrum. These aspects appear also to play a significant role in the recruitment and selection of autistic applicants.

## 2.5 Recruitment and selection of autistic applicants

1. Given the above indications that employment outcomes for autistic people might depend at least partly on the recruitment and selection process, the next section provides an examination of the common practices used by employers, and the potential challenges faced by autistic applicants.

### 2.5 1 The challenges of the job interview for autistic people

The employment interview has been the central plank of the selection process for many decades. It is sometimes the only vehicle for assessing applicants, although increasingly with the introduction of more multi-layered selection processes, it has served as the initial screening or final test of an applicant’s suitability (Levashina *et al.*, 2014). However, the ‘triad of impairments’ of social communication, social interaction and social imagination experienced by all autistic adults to a greater or lesser degree **(2.3.1)** renders the conventional selection process a greater challenge for them than for neurotypical applicants. Müller *et al*. (2003) found that the majority of participants experienced difficulty with the process, while Giarelli *et al.* (2013, p. 567) reported that young autistic adults with ‘Asperger Syndrome’ identified *“socialising”* as the greatest barrier to securing employment. In general, the literature shows that autistic people experience difficulties at each stage of the job process, beginning with the preparation of the curriculum vitae and any phone contact prior to the interview (Müller *et al.*, 2003). Face-to-face interviews, however, pose the greatest challenge as the presentation and pattern of communication of autistic individuals will typically differ from neurotypical applicants (Ryan and Wessel, 2008).

The National Autistic Society's “*Too Much Information*” video (2017), used in their campaign to highlight the employment gap for autistic people, illustrates the challenges of the interview process. These include the sensory overload of a busy office environment; the sometimes imprecise or ‘open-ended’ questioning that may be misinterpreted by the interviewee; the extra time needed to process information; and the judgement as to what information to disclose in a formal interview (National Autistic Society, 2017). Moreover, the literature suggests there are differences in the perception of the interview process in respect of autistic people: whereas neurotypical applicants tend to regard interviews as a fair method of selection compared with other forms of assessment (Hausknecht, Day and Thomas, 2004), many autistic people consider it the least effective means of determining their suitability to a particular post (Feinstein, 2018).

### 2.5.2 Expected behaviours in successful interviewees and autistic applicants

The impression one conveys at an interview is one of the major determinants of a successful job application (Rosenfeld, 1997), and the literature highlights certain modes of behaviour that are more likely to lead to success. These relate both to verbal behaviour (fluency of speech, tone of voice and responsiveness to the interviewer) and non-verbal behaviour (handshaking, eye contact, posture and facial expressions). In the case of the former, DeGroot and Kluemper (2007, p. 31) found that an *“attractive”* voice – defined as *“an appealing mix of speech rate, loudness and pitch”* with few pauses – had a positive impact on interviewers, while those not displaying these attributes were less highly rated. Similarly, in a study using audio analysis to examine the conversational skills of 20 ‘high-functioning’ autistic people, assessors identified *“impaired communication skills”* in the interviewees, which impacted negatively on their markings (Feinstein, 2018, p. 155). According to their listeners, the autism group did notably less well than the control group that had the same nonverbal IQ and problem-solving skills in terms of *“speech speed, use of pauses, and patterns of stress and intonation. They also displayed a greater tendency to use overly formal language, to shift or repeat topics abruptly or inappropriately, and to inject irrelevant details”* (Feinstein, 2018, p. 155). Consequently, listeners in this exercise said they would offer only 30% of the autism group a second interview, compared with 75% of the non-autism group.

Another aspect of performance generally expected from job applicants is a degree of self-promotion where candidates aim to make a good impression by drawing attention to their *“strengths, accomplishments, and importance”* (Den Hartog, De Hoogh and Belschak, 2020, p. 262). The literature indicates, however, that autistic people often struggle to ‘sell themselves’ in an interview, even if they have the right skills for the job (Richards, 2012).[[2]](#footnote-2) In respect of non-verbal behaviour, candidates with ‘good’ eye contact, more ‘positive’ facial expressions and ‘better’ posture were more likely to experience a successful outcome in graduate interviews, and interviewers were *“at least to some extent, recruiting in their own image”* (Anderson and Shackleton, 1990, p. 74). Similarly, interviewees who avoided eye contact, exhibited ‘low energy’ levels and spoke in a halting manner received significantly lower ratings, and were not offered a second interview (McGovern and Tinsley, 1978, p. 163).

Another significant factor in non-verbal behaviour according to the literature is the level of self-monitoring displayed by interviewees. This relates to the ability to adjust one’s behaviour by, for example, suppressing one’s real emotions in order to control the image projected to others (Snyder, 1987). Those displaying a high degree of self-monitoring are more skilful in controlling their mode of behaviour (Snyder, 1974; Friedman and Miller-Herringer, 1991) than low self-monitors who, while behaving consistently, have difficulty concealing their emotions. Based on their greater ability to modify their behaviour according to different situations and to adapt to different styles of interviewing, these individuals were expected to perform better in job interviews (Levine and Feldman, 2002).

## 2.6 Possible alternatives to the conventional job interview for assessing job fitness in autistic people

Some employers are now adopting a different approach to recruitment when selecting autistic candidates in the belief that it will enable them to appoint some individuals who may not perform well at conventional interviews but may have the best skills for the job (Kemp, 2018). Specialisterne – three quarters of whose employees are on the autism spectrum – was founded by the Danish father of an autistic child and specialises in software testing. Since 2004, it has been developing non-interview methods for assessing autistic applicants and has expanded internationally, including an office in Northern Ireland. Its website states: “*To be successful in most jobs strong interview skills are not required. Good recruitment processes assess for candidate skills and competencies based on the needs of the job*” (https://us.specialisterne.com/employment-discovery-workshops/, accessed 17 November 2023). Its approach is to hold initial half-day assessments called Employment Discovery Workshops or ‘hangouts’ in which autistic job applicants can demonstrate their skills on specific projects. At the end of these initial assessments, some candidates are selected for up to six weeks of further assessment and training. During this period, they use Lego Mindstorms at first individually and then in small teams to build Lego robots. Recruitment managers then use their observations of candidates’ performance to match them to particular job roles (Sonne, 2016, cited in Feinstein, 2018, p 231).

Others have followed the Specialisterne model: the software company SAP has an ‘Autism at Work’ programme where candidates complete a 30-day screening process in which their skills are assessed (Velasco, 2017, cited in Feinstein, 2018, p 232). SAP link diversity in a company with innovation and competitive advantage and consider autistic applicants for a range of different jobs in the company. The co-leader of the Autism at Work programme commented that they had attracted high calibre candidates with degrees in, for example, electrical engineering, computer sciences, applied mathematics and anthropology but, importantly, they would not have been successful if they had used the “*standard procedures*” (Velasco, 2017 cited in Feinstein, 2018, p 233). SAP also introduced a ‘soft’ skills module to help candidates who were unfamiliar with working in a professional environment. A Harvard Business School review of the programme found that it succeeded in addressing some of the industry’s skills shortages by accessing a different talent pool. It also prompted the company to re-examine its human resources policies and processes to make them more inclusive and effective, recognising that all staff, both undeclared autistic employees and neurotypical staff, benefited from improved management practices (Pisano and Austin, 2016).

Microsoft is another multi-national organisation that formed the view that CVs were “*not the best way to assess talent*” and that conventional recruitment methods would identify those who were successful at interviews but not necessarily “*those with the best talent*” (Vermeesch, 2018 cited in Kemp, 2018). Consequently, they adopted a different approach whereby potential applicants were invited to perform tasks similar to ones they would carry out as employees, such as coding. In this way applicants were able to demonstrate their ability, and hiring managers had an opportunity to observe their problem-solving skills. As part of the process, job coaches were appointed to advise applicants on the company’s structures and processes; and managers developed a profile of individuals with the aim of providing support and good management, a process which resulted in "*better managers across the board*” (Kemp, 2018, p. 1). Critically, the company believes that such inclusivity has impacted directly on the products they developed such as Focus Assist, a device to turn off notifications which allows users to focus while using the software (Kemp, 2018).

Other examples of those who take a non-traditional approach to assessing autistic candidates include Transport for London who also focus on task assessment in the selection process. “*We realised that people who were best at understanding the complex interdependencies and peculiar butterfly effects of managing London’s 3,000 traffic lights might be on the autism spectrum…”* (McNeill, 2016, cited in Feinstein, 2018, p 110), but the requirement for ‘soft’ skills was hindering the recruitment of people with the right technical ability. It was decided therefore that in the case of autistic applicants the interview process would be adapted to assess the individual’s strengths in areas such as data analytics, traffic modelling, and coding rather than communication and presentational skills.

It would appear that a process that focuses on the nature of the job – and allows candidates time to demonstrate their skills in job-related tasks rather than in the separate and often unrelated process of the interview – is likely to benefit autistic people. According to the Centre for Research in Autism and Education: “*The few existing studies in this area suggest that work placements and internships might be a key step in the process to easing people on the autistic spectrum into paid employment”* (Centre for Research in Autism and Education, n.d, p 1.). The Business Disability Forum also recommends work trials for candidates with autism: *“It’s a different format from an interview. Autistic candidates get used to the workplace and can be assessed on their ability to do the job rather than how they can tell someone how they can do the job”* (Higginbottom, 2017, p. 1)*.* The National Autistic Society also supports this route into work and cites the case of an autistic applicant who applied for a position as a filing clerk. While the applicant performed poorly in the interview, giving monosyllabic answers to questions rather than elaborating on his experience, he scored almost 100% in the filing test – significantly higher than other candidates. The employer was reluctant to engage the candidate but, following discussions with The National Autistic Society, a work trial was offered as an alternative method of assessing the individual’s ability to do the job. He was successful and three years later was still employed in the job (National Autistic Society, n.d.).

Support for some form of work trial may be found in the literature with autistic applicants emphasising the anxiety caused by the interview process. One individual explained: “*Showing your skills can be easier than being forced to articulate them in a socially pressurised environment”* (Feinstein, 2018, p. 161). Such selection practices are untypical, however, and at present appear limited to employers seeking to recruit those with specific skills, such as computer literacy and mathematical skills, where autistic adults are perceived to perform strongly.

## 2.7 Stereotyping during the recruitment process

The section above outlines the issues relating to autistic candidates’ efforts to create the ‘right’ impression when attending job interviews. In cases where they have chosen to disclose their condition, they may also be subject to aspects of stereotyping, if their potential employers have formed preconceived ideas or ‘impressions’ – either through the media or personal association – of the character and performance of autistic people.

### 2.7.1 Positive and negative stereotyping in relation to autistic job applicants

Stereotyping is the generalisation of a group of people to whom we attribute a defined set of characteristics, either positive or negative (Grandey, Houston and Avery, 2019). In this context, (Lippmann, 1922, p. 12) explored the notion of a ‘fictitious world’ where people form an impression of certain sections of society based on limited or no personal experience of them. The impression arises, it is argued, because of an awareness – particularly influenced by the media – of the existence of a wider society that is not known to them but which nevertheless instils mental images or ‘interior representations’ (Lippmann, 1922, p. 20). These images, however, often reduce the complexity and variety of real life to a simpler, but distorted, model of reality.

It is estimated that approximately 1 in every 100 people in the United Kingdom has autism (Brugha *et al.*, 2012). For many people, therefore, direct contact with people on the autism spectrum will be infrequent. Much of what society understands by autism, therefore, is learned through the medium of films or television programmes and, to a lesser extent, novels, autobiographies and the press (Draaisma, 2009). According to the literature, the media representation of autistic people with exceptional skills such as in ‘Rain Man’ – the 1980s film widely credited with bringing autism to the attention of the general public – has contributed to a perception of autism that does not accord with the clinical definition of the condition (Dillenburger *et al.*, 2013). Such portrayals also frequently confuse autism with the much rarer ‘savant syndrome’ which relates to individuals of generally low intelligence who nevertheless display remarkable skills in areas such as mathematics, music, languages and art, although these same skills may disappear as a child develops (Selfe, 1978; Wallace, 2008). Howlin *et al.* (2009) estimated that approximately 30% of those with autism possessed savant skills (equivalent to 30 in 10,000 of the population) whereas Hyltenstam (2016), using different criteria, argued that it is as low as one in a million people. In films, documentaries and other media, however, the autistic individual exhibiting savant skills has been over-represented (Jones and Harwood, 2009; Baroutsis *et al.*, 2021).

The literature confirms the stereotyping of autistic people in this respect with a number of studies finding a perception among lay people that autistic people possess special abilities (Stewart, 2008; Dillenburger *et al.*, 2013; Wood and Freeth, 2016). Also, while levels of awareness of autism are reportedly high among the general public (Dillenburger *et al*., 2013), certain aspects of their perceptions are often negative and inaccurate (Huws and Jones, 2010). Characteristics commonly associated with autistic people were examined by Wood and Freeth (2016) who asked university undergraduates with no exposure to autism to cite the most common traits that they believed society associated with autistic people. The ten traits most frequently reported were: *“poor social skills; being introverted and withdrawn; poor communication; difficult personality or behaviour; poor emotional intelligence; special abilities; high intelligence; awkward; obsessive; and low intelligence”* (Wood and Freeth, 2016, p. 136). Following on from this, a separate group was asked to rate the valence of these traits, along with additional traits frequently used to describe disabled and non-disabled people (Nario-Redmond, 2010). Eight of the ten traits were found to have a negative connotation, and were deemed to be significantly more negative than traits associated with non-disabled people.

It is noteworthy in this study that autistic people were perceived as both of ‘high intelligence’ and of ‘low intelligence’, whereas intelligence is independent of an autism spectrum diagnosis (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Whilst not mirroring the normal distribution of the neurotypical population, many autistic people would fall within the average range (Wood and Freeth, 2016). Of greater significance, perhaps, is that as undergraduates, many of the participants in the study will become the employers and managers of the future. Any misconceptions and negative attitudes they held, therefore, could be influential in their assessment and selection of prospective autistic job applicants.

In addition to the negative and inaccurate perceptions of autism found in the lay population, Huws and Jones (2010) have drawn attention to the degree of confidence with which these views were expressed by those who stated they had little or no knowledge of the condition and had no direct contact with autistic people. Similarly, a study in Northern Ireland found that whilst 87% of participants were familiar with the term ‘autism’, misconceptions included the belief that autism was found mostly in children (55%), that autistic people were unable to walk (11%) and again, most commonly, that they had special abilities (62 %) (Stewart, 2008). Reflecting these findings, Pellicano, Dinsmore and Charman (2014) concluded that more needs to be done to inform the wider public about the true nature of autism in order to combat the stereotype of the ‘savant’ and other misconceptions.

To counterbalance the often ‘negative’ stereotype of autistic people, some research has sought to identify the ‘positive’ traits associated with autism such as an *“attention to detail”* (Happé and Frith, 2006, p. 5), *“enhanced perceptual ability”* (Mottron *et al.*, 2006, p. 27; see also Remington *et al.*, 2009) and a strong performance in analysing or constructing systems (Baron-Cohen, 2009). The risk, however, is that one stereotype replaces another, and certain traits are looked for in autistic people rather than appraising the qualities of the individual job applicant. It is not true, for example, that ‘high-functioning’ autistic people are necessarily skilled in IT (although some are), nor do autistic people necessarily favour routine, repetitive tasks (although some do) (Feinstein, 2018). Given the heterogeneity of the condition, there is a very wide variation in the skills and profile of autistic people that includes creative artists such as the actor Sir Anthony Hopkins, the naturalist Chris Packham and climate change activist Greta Thunberg (Fenn, 2017). It is argued, therefore, that there should no more be a presumption of traits – ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ – in a person with autism than in any other individual. Indeed, Bury *et al.* (2020) in their review of the literature to date have argued that *“there is currently no strong evidence supporting or negating a workplace autism advantage…”* (Bury *et al.*, 2020, p. 1); and that more research is needed that is less reliant on stereotypes to identify the individual strengths that the autistic worker may bring to the workplace.

### 2.7.2 Stereotyping, person-job fit and person-organisation fit in the selection of autistic applicants

In recent years, ‘positive’ recruitment of autistic people has been evident in relation to information technology, where some autistic people are perceived as ‘ideal’ candidates for certain positions. Similar to the ‘glass slipper’ theory propounded by Ashcraft (2013), specific jobs – for example in software programme testing – have been viewed as ‘naturally’ suited to particular individuals (Ashcraft, 2013). While this practice is viewed by some as providing excellent job opportunities for a disadvantaged group with high levels of unemployment, it is seen by others as an example of occupational stereotyping (Bryan, 2018). Critics maintain, for example, that while there is positive recruitment of those with technical skills, autistic people without these abilities are not considered for employment in other capacities in these organisations.

The practice of matching individuals with particular abilities to the specific requirements of a job, however, has been widely reported in the literature. Person-job fit (P-J fit) describes the degree to which the skills and profile of an applicant match the job specification (Kim *et al.*, 2020). Two aspects of P-J fit have been cited: *‘demand-ability fit’* (the match between the capabilities of an employee and the requirements of a job) and *‘need–supply fit’* (the match between the needs of an employee and the resources that are provided by a job) (Kim, Crowley and Lee, 2021, p. 288). It is argued that employee selection in most organisations focuses on P-J fit with the subjective evaluation of P-J fit strongly linked to hiring recommendations (Kinnicki *et al.*, 1990). A person’s abilities may be defined as their education, experience, and skills, while the requirements of a job relate to the ability to perform satisfactorily in the post (Wilk and Sackett, 1996). Additional factors in the process may include the personal goals and ‘values’ of the applicant (Locke *et al.*, 1981).

Traditionally, P-J fit is assessed by a detailed analysis of the components of the job, which identifies the requisite skills, knowledge, and abilities to perform specific tasks (Sekiguchi, 2004). Such an approach results in a more successful selection of employees in comparison to unstructured processes according to some researchers; and the main method of assessing compatibility between applicant and job is the interview process (Levashina *et al.*, 2014).

Other research, however, indicates that P-J fit is not the optimal means of assessing employees and that selection practices should consider, in addition, behavioural aspects in candidates. The concept of ‘Person-Organisation fit’ (P-O fit), therefore, relates to the compatibility of an individual with an organisation’s culture, aims and ethos rather than with a specific job (Kristof, 1996; Rivera, 2012). P-O fit is viewed, in particular, as necessary for maintaining a flexible and sustainable workforce that will operate effectively in a competitive business and employment market (Kristof,1996).

Similarly, as employees may hold several jobs during their time with a company, it is argued that general cognitive ability is more important than a specific P-J fit (Behling, 1998), and that employers should select job applicants who share the values and visions of the organisation (Bowen, Ledford and Nathan, 1991). Others maintain that assessments based on P-J fit alone fail to take account of the changing nature of work, where teamwork and flexibility should also be important factors in the decision-making process. Furthermore, it is argued, people and organisations are attracted to one another based on their similarity, which in turn influences an applicant’s job choices and ultimately an organisation’s decision to hire (Adkins, Russell and Werbel, 1994).

A high level of P-O fit is reported to produce a number of positive outcomes such as job satisfaction and organisational cohesiveness, but this approach may also have negative outcomes, such as limiting diversity and the potential to broaden a company’s perspective (Powell, 1998). Overall, the research indicates that both P-O fit and P-J fit are important factors in selecting the right employee and, despite the *“questionable reliability and validity”* of traditional interviews (Sekiguchi, 2004, p. 187) managers are reluctant to abandon them because they are viewed as the most effective means of selecting applicants who are a good ‘fit’ for the job and/or the organisation (Judge, Higgins and Cable, 2000).

## 2.8 The use of assistive technology to prepare autistic people for job interviews

Assistive technology has been used in recent years to help the autistic population, particularly children, develop social, behavioural and communication skills. This has included software programmes, self-taught courses and games aimed at ‘improving’ the social communication and interactive skills of those with autism (de Heer *et al.*, 2020; Dechsling *et al.*, 2021). In the case of autistic adults, many have the skills to perform well in vocational activities but find the process of engaging in a job interview stressful as well as socially and verbally challenging (Bross *et al.*, 2021). Strickland, Coles and Southern (2013) therefore evaluated the effectiveness of an internet training programme aimed at teaching job interview skills to youths aged 16 to 19 with ‘high-functioning’ autism. A significant improvement in *“verbal content skills”* (Strickland et al, 2013, p. 1) was reported in those who completed the programme compared with those who did not. There was, however, no evaluation of a more generalised learning with different interviewers, nor of modifications to questions or of non-verbal cues, which would be expected in a conventional interview. Moreover, while participants gained a greater facility for responding to set interview questions from following the programme, there was noticeably less ‘improvement’ in their posture, eye contact and facial expression (Strickland et al, 2013). Researchers attributed this to the problems many autistic individuals have in interpreting non-verbal behaviours to modify their social interaction (see **2.5.1** above).

Other training programmes have included simulated job interviews *“with a virtual character and didactic training”* where those who underwent training “*greatly improved*” their interview performance compared with the control group (Smith *et al.*, 2014, p. 12). Participants reported that they felt more confident about their ability to acquit themselves better in future interviews but there was no evidence of employment outcomes at the time. Moreover, the literature also suggests that autistic people may lack the judgement and self-awareness to assess their actual performance (Knott, Dunlop and Mackay, 2006). As with Strickland *et al* (2013), the study relied on set questions and responses during the interview, whereas autistic people would have greater difficulty generalising to questions that deviated from rehearsed scripts (de Marchena, Eigsti and Yerys, 2015). Smith *et al.* (2015) followed up their initial research with a survey six months after participants had undergone training in order to establish employment outcomes. The sponsored study found that *“trainees had greater odds of attaining a competitive position*… (than the control group)” (Smith *et al.*, 2015, p. 3364) but in reaching their conclusion, there was no differentiation between paid and voluntary employment. This seems of particular relevance when 60% of the trained participants had at some stage in their life been engaged in paid employment and, following the programme, a lesser number (53%) were in either voluntary *or* paid employment.

Other examples of assistive technology include a programme where participants practised with a range of ‘virtual’ interviewers of different gender and ethnicity who adopted various attitudes and settings to reflect the diversity of interviewing style and environment that applicants would experience in real life. Using a video recording of the interview, the trainer and participant reviewed and analysed the performance. Although the programme was still in the testing phase, the programme designers maintained that avatars are more efficient and consistent than role-playing exercises with real people because autistic students found the experience less stressful than social interaction. The pilot study found that four sessions with an avatar improved students’ interview scores by 80% (University of Southern California Institute for Creative Technologies, 2015). However, there were no details of the baseline or final scores, and thus far there has been no independent evaluation of the programme. More recently, research has been underway to develop a system “*to allow people to rehearse social skills with an expressive, autonomous social robot in realistic workplace scenarios*” (McKenna *et al.*, 2019, p. 2), beginning with a test to judge the reactions to interruptions by a robot rather than by a human. They concluded that autistic participants experienced “*marginally less task disruption from a robot interrupter comparatively to a human*”.(McKenna *et al.*, 2020, p 1).

The common purpose of all these programmes was to modify so far as possible the innate behaviours of autistic people to achieve the neurotypical presentation expected at job interviews rather than to develop a form of assessment that enabled autistic applicants to demonstrate their ability and job-related skills. In this respect, such programmes appear to conform to the ‘medical model’ of disability – implying that autistic applicants need to alter their behaviour rather than that the recruitment process should be changed to better assess them.

A few specific programmes have had some success in training participants in scripted responses to interview questions, but no study has demonstrated that training gives autistic applicants the capability to generalise their learning to a less prescriptive format. Nordahl-Hansen *et al*. (2020, p. 264) in their review of virtual reality interventions for those with autism concluded that, “*even though there has been a substantial increase in the use of Virtual Reality in studies with neurodevelopmental disorders… empirical evidence to support the efficacy of its implementation is still scarce and unsystematic”.* Moreover, the literature recognises that interviews – in particular artificial intelligence screening – will test a much wider range of skills and behaviours than verbal responses, including eye contact, posture, personal appearance and body language.

## 2.9 The implications for autistic candidates of algorithm-based selection procedures

As indicated above, AI has been used to assist autistic applicants with interview techniques and in recent years has played an increasing role in selecting job applicants (Tschang and Almirall, 2021). It is already common practice for companies such as Google, Microsoft, IBM, and LinkedIn, as well as major retailers and customer service organisations, to use technology to screen applicants at the preliminary stages of the hiring process, using psychometric tests such as Situational Judgement Tests[[3]](#footnote-3), computer games or online questionnaires to assess applicants before human resources are involved (Cheng and Hackett, 2021). The current estimate is that some 60% of companies are already using “*applicant tracking systems that apply textual analysis techniques in recruitment and selection*” (Cheng and Hackett, 2021, p. 9). Where candidates fail these initial tests, they are eliminated and receive no feedback on performance (Buranyi, 2018).

More recently, technology has been applied in a more sophisticated way with many leading companies, such as Unilever and Goldman Sachs, using robots to perform initial interviews before successful candidates go forward to the next round (Bogen and Rieke, 2018; Buranyi, 2018). Applicants set up a webcam on their computer or phone, respond to questions that appear on the screen and make a video recording of their answers. The software may have an actor or a graphic with a pre-recorded voice but there is no-one present listening or reacting to the candidate. Algorithms scan the videos and analyse the words or phrases used, the conciseness of presentation and the level of confidence displayed. In addition, the technology is able to detect ‘micro expressions’ such as the frequency of frowning, blinking or smiling, as well as assess posture and body language (Turner, 2018). In this context it is interesting to note that the physical mannerisms the software is programmed to detect align very closely with those identified in the literature as necessary for successful interviewees (see **2.5.3** above), and that these mannerisms are less likely to be associated with autistic applicants.

The stated intention of the creator of the software used by many firms was to ‘democratise’ interviews and promote diversity by removing unconscious bias (Turner, 2018). However, with unintended consequences, the use of algorithms may actually reinforce existing stereotypes and perpetrate homophily (the tendency to favour those with similar characteristics to those carrying out the interview or to those already working in the organisation) (Kelan, 2023). In some cases, for example, data results are compared with scores from top-performing staff in a company to replicate the profile of an ‘ideal’ employee (Buranyi, 2018). Furthermore, in recent years, Amazon had to abandon a ‘sexist’ recruitment tool it had been developing as the data it relied on from the previous ten years – when the workforce was almost exclusively male – showed a preference for male candidates and awarded fewer marks to CVs that contained references to “women”, such as “women’s chess club captain” (Dastin, 2018). Selection devices of this nature that are engineered to give preferential treatment to the neurotypical population (and, more precisely, to certain subsets within that group) are likely to have an adverse effect on outcomes for autistic applicants whose profile of behaviour will fail to match the prescribed performance.

***2.9.1 The wider impact of technology on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) in recruitment***

The increasing use of Artificial Intelligence for the recruitment process is likely to impact more widely on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in the workplace. A study of 500 mid-sized organisations from a range of industries in five countries found that 24% of businesses have already implemented AI hiring processes, and 56 % planned to adopt it in the following year (Drage and Mackereth, 2022). The use of online systems has led to much larger volumes of job applications from candidates with the result that more employers have moved away from manual systems. Instead, they have sought to reduce their workload by using recruitment software to select a certain number of candidates that meet their specified criteria, from whom they may draw their final selection for face-to-face interview (Nugent and Scott-Parker, 2022). The objective of the process is to streamline the examination of applications and condense the decision-making process but in so doing, there is a significant risk that the data may exclude, or discriminate against, certain sections of the workforce as the programmes are unlikely to accommodate the varied nature of disability, gender or race.

AI recruitment software is most likely to impact applicants adversely as a result of reliance on historical data, where CVs are used to train, or amend, the software. Such an approach perpetuates the status quo, and industries and organisations where, for example, females, disabled people or minorities have been underrepresented in the past, will tend to replicate the same profile in the future, if the software is modelled solely on past data. This arose in the case of Amazon (**see 2.9**). Similarly, disabled people, who are likely to constitute only a small minority of the workforce, are less likely to be represented in data on past successful employees (Nugent and Scott-Parker, 2022).

In some cases, disabled people may be excluded even from accessing the job application process because of the techniques used to establish legitimacy of entry. For example, CAPTCHAs that aim to distinguish human beings from bots set time limits that may disadvantage some physically disabled people with agility problems, as well as some dyslexic applicants who may take longer to read the instructions (Guo *et al.*, 2019). Similarly, some crowdworkers with visual impairments have reported accessibility problems with the home pages of crowdsourcing sites such as Amazon Mechanical Turk, which involved CAPTCHAs. The use of aids such as a screen reader or magnifier tool, for example, are likely to lead to timings that exceed the limit set for the access test. It is possible to overcome some of these difficulties. In one case, for example, a visually impaired crowdworker contacted customer services who resolved the issue by broadcasting the CAPTCHA. But other disabled applicants may be deterred by the initial barrier they encounter (Zyskowski, Morris, Bigham, Gray and Kane, 2015).

The potential for bias extends also to AI video hiring programmes as the algorithms are often trained on data drawn from the current demographics of society. Consequently, facial recognition tools may work less well on people with darker skin tones because people of colour are underrepresented in datasets. Similarly, those with certain conditions such as Down’s Syndrome, Bell’s Palsy or Parkinson’s disease are likely to fall outside the parameters set by the algorithms used to assess facial expressions. Equally, candidates with a stammer, strong accent or unusual modulation are at risk of failing these AI hiring tests (Guo *et al.*, 2019). It can be seen that in this context, characteristics that are simply underrepresented in society become *negative* factors when subject to AI scrutiny, and lead to rejection.

The lack of transparency in the content and application of these algorithms means that where there is discrimination – albeit inadvertent - it may not become apparent until after the software has been deployed, if at all. While those promoting AI hiring tools argue that they are designed to eliminate bias, in practice if they are applied without a thorough understanding of their composition and operation, they are at risk of achieving the opposite by reinforcing bias. An important consideration in this context is whether employers have an incentive to proactively address the possible biases in their recruitment software and ensure that their systems are fair, transparent and accountable. Where incidents of discrimination are brought to their notice (as with Amazon), they have an obligation to remedy the bias. In other cases, however, where it is not transparent, and sufficient job applications are received to meet the business’s operational requirements, employers may feel less inclined to be proactive, with the result that systemic discrimination will continue.

## 2.10 The legal framework and government strategy for autism and employment

The legal framework pertaining to autistic job applicants is set out in the Autism Act (2009) and the Equality Act 2010. The Autism Act requires the government to publish, [and keep under review, an adult autism strategy and statutory guidance for local authorities and NHS organisations aimed at supporting autistic people, including in respect of employment.](https://www.crossrivertherapy.com/autism/autism-laws-and-policies) According to *The National Strategy for Autistic Children, Young People and Adults 2021-2026,* published in 2021, autistic [people have the right to work and receive fair treatment in the workplace, and employers have a duty to make ‘reasonable adjustments’ for job applicants, in accordance with the Equality Act 2010](https://bing.com/search?q=autism+act+rights+of+autistic+job+applicants).

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| [The strategy acknowledges the very low employment rates among autistic people due in part to *“recruitment processes not being autism friendly”* (Department for Health and Social Care, 2021, p 21)and undertakes to *“ensure that autistic people can get the adaptations or extra support they need … to get into work*” (Department for Health and Social Care, 2021, p. 22). However, the implementation plan for the first year of the strategy (2021 to 2022) lacks precision regarding the specific actions needed to change recruitment processes. The plan refers to broad objectives such as “*strengthening and promoting pathways to employmen*t“ (Department for Health and Social Care, 2021, p. 19) and “*continuing our work to ensure our Jobcentre network is welcoming and supportive to autistic customers, developing and testing new approaches…*” (Department for Health and Social Care, 2021, p. 23) but the lack of specificity fails to address the problems in recruitment processes identified by autistic people, such as standardised testing and the conduct of interviews. Moreover, while the plan](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-strategy-for-autistic-children-young-people-and-adults-2021-to-2026) includes a commitment to publish an annual report on the delivery and outcomes of the strategy, starting from 2022, no such report has been produced and none is planned. Instead, in April 2023 the Department for Work and Pensions announced that they would be conducting a review to consider measures to improve autistic people’s employment prospects, due for publication in 2024. Under the Equality Act 2010, disabled people may request ‘reasonable adjustments’ to the recruitment process, including interviews, to compensate for any disadvantages they may experience due to their impairment (Equality Act, 2010). Disability in this case is defined as a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term negative effect on one’s ability to do normal daily activities. Although there is no prescriptive list - and employers may refuse requests - adjustments that might apply to those on the autism spectrum include receiving interview questions in advance, details of the interview panel or additional time to process questions. Since its enactment, a number of actions have been brought by autistic individuals on the grounds that they have been discriminated against in the workplace but there appear to have been only two since 2015 that relate to the recruitment process. One such case, *The Government Legal Service v Brookes, 2017,* centred on the format of the entrance test, known as a Situational Judgement Test (SJT). This standardised test, usually in a multiple-choice format, presents applicants with a description of a problem related to the job for which they have applied, and requires them to choose a course of action. The Employment Appeal Tribunal ruled that the Government Legal Service had indirectly discriminated against a candidate with Asperger’s Syndrome who had been required to take a SJT as part of the recruitment process and was denied her request to answer the questions in the form of short narrative answers. It stated that the requirement “*placed the candidate at a particular disadvantage, by comparison with non-disabled candidates who did not have Asperger's*”, and noted that of the small number of those who had declared themselves as having autism or Asperger's, only one had ever passed the test (*The Government Legal Service v Ms T Brookes: UKEAT/0302/16/RN*, no date). The Employment Tribunal must, however, satisfy itself that an autistic applicant’s requests pass the “reasonableness” test. In Rackham *v Judicial Appointments* *Commission*, for example*,* it was held that employers can reasonably refuse adjustments that would undermine those parts of the selection process needed to ensure successful candidates can perform in the role. The plaintiff, who had Asperger’s Syndrome, and had difficulty with one-to-one communication and hypothetical questions, made a request, inter alia, to “simplify” the written questions in a skills test. While the employer was willing to allow him extra time to complete the test with the assistance of someone he knew, and to submit his answers offline or by email, they argued that the questions replicated the requirements of the position of the post he had applied for as a “Disability Qualified Tribunal Member” at the Judicial Appointments Commission. In this case the Employment Tribunal found in favour of the respondent.Other actions regarding different aspects of the recruitment process may be taken by autistic applicants in the future as the concept of ‘reasonableness’ is tested further. For example, autistic candidates might argue that in order to overcome problems of auditory processing, interpretation and executive functioning, which are exacerbated by the tensions of the interview setting, they need to study the questions in advance. At present, some employers agree to this, but others do not, on the grounds that it would be an unfair advantage to the autistic applicant. It is possible, however, that a future Employment Tribunal judgment might be asked to rule whether the contrary applies, and that not to allow advance notice (rather than simplification) of questions falls short of the requirement “*to take such steps as it is reasonable … to avoid the disadvantage*” experienced by this form of disability (Equality Act 2010, s20). Similarly, an autistic applicant might argue that an alternative form of testing more aligned to the nature of the job for which they are applying would be a fair – and reasonable – alternative means of assessing their suitability to a job, rather than the conventional job interview.The growth in AI software for hiring purposes (**2.9** above) also raises the question of whether there is sufficient legal oversight of such systems and what redress, if any, is open to candidates who may wish to challenge the fairness and transparency of these processes. The All-Party Parliamentary Group for the Future of Work had recommended an Accountability for Algorithms Act in November 2021, but their proposals were not taken forward. The government’s white paper “A pro-innovation approach to AI regulation”, published in March 2023, recognises that AI can have a “*significant impact on people’s lives, including…recruitment outcomes*” (Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, 2023, p. 29). However, the government has adopted a non-statutory approach and the proposals for a new AI regulatory framework rely heavily on existing regulators such as the Employment Agency Standards Inspectorate (EASI) to join forces with “*other regulators and organisations in the employment sector*” to produce guidance for employers (Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, 2023, p. 43). Importantly, there are no proposed sanctions for those who fail to comply with the guidance. The document has been criticised by some outside of government as “laissez-faire” (Brione, 2023, p. 1). By contrast, the EU is in the process of drawing up an Artificial Intelligence Act, which classifies as high-risk all AI systems that recruit and select job applicants by screening and evaluating applications. Proposals include requirements for member states to assess operators' compliance with the obligations laid down for high-risk AI systems. Crucially, they would have access to the source code of the AI systems and would be required to take any corrective measures to “*prohibit, restrict, withdraw or recall AI systems*” (Madiega, 2023, p. 6) that do not comply, with the option of imposing heavy fines in the case of persistent non-compliance (European Commission, 2021).2.11 SummaryThere are very high levels of unemployment among autistic people, including graduates and others with no intellectual impairment, despite their express wish to secure a job (National Autistic Society, 2018; Rosenblatt, 2008). Autistic graduates are the least likely of all disabled graduates to be in employment, and less than one third of postgraduate (research) graduates have been found to be in full-time employment some 15 months after completing their doctorate (Allen and Coney, 2021). The traditional job interview, with its emphasis on social skills and neurotypical behaviour, is a major barrier for autistic people seeking employment, given their difficulties in social communication and interaction (Ryan and Wessel, 2008; Bross *et al.*, 2021). In addition, they are seeking to enter the job market at a time when over four out of five jobs are in the service industries, and employers require a high level of ‘soft’ skills from employees (Nickson *et al.,* 2012). Studies on autistic people’s experience of job interviews have tended to follow the ‘medical model’ of disability, where researchers have identified those areas where autistic individuals fall short of the neurotypical performance expected, and seek to address them (Strickland *et al*., 2013). A notable development in recent years has been the assessment of assistive technology to ‘train’ autistic applicants in mannerisms (e.g., eye contact and posture) and communication (e.g., form and length of responses, interpretation of hypothetical questions) (Smith *et al.*, 2021). Success in these areas remains unproven, however, as there is no empirical evidence to date that learned behaviour and responses to set questions can be generalised to ‘normal’ job interviews with employment outcomes (Nordahl-Hansen *et al.*, 2020).This thesis also engages with the concept of stereotyping as it applies to autistic individuals. The influence of bias in recruiting and selecting job applicants is widely reported in terms of age, gender and race but much less is known about the impact on those with a disability, including those with autism (Lipton *et al.*, 1991; King *et al.*, 2006; Posthuma and Campion, 2009). The influence of stereotyping has an important bearing on outcomes for autistic people attending interviews. In recent years autism has received much greater – although not necessarily more balanced – exposure in the media and the study analyses the role of the media in shaping perceptions of autism in popular culture. Preconceptions may be held about the suitability of autistic people in the workplace, which could be positive or negative depending on their perceived skills. The study therefore examines possible preconceptions held by employers, some of whom may regard autistic employees as exceptionally able in, for example, information technology and therefore a potential asset to their organisation (Wang, 2014; Annabi *et al*., 2017). Other employers however, may view them as socially awkward individuals with poor communication skills who might be difficult to integrate in the workplace (Nesbitt, 2000; Chen *et al.*, 2015). This in turn raises the question of the autistic person’s position when assessed by employers in relation to person-job and person-organisation fit, which is also covered in this study. In addition, the implications for autistic candidates of recent algorithm-based selection procedures, which are based on neurotypical behaviour, are examined**,** together with the wider implications forEquality, Diversity and Inclusion in the job market. Finally, the current legal framework and government policies that apply to autistic job applicants must be considered.This chapter (Part 1 of the literature review) has outlined the problematic in relation to unemployment and autism, outlining the challenges of the recruitment process experienced by autistic individuals seeking to enter the job market. In Part 2 of the literature review (chapter 3), the models of disability are examined, along with Goffman’s theoretical idea of ‘impression management’ in the context of autistic job seekers.  |  |

# Chapter 3: Literature Review (Part 2)

## 3.1 Introduction

In part 2 of the literature review, the presentation of self and theory of impression management, as advanced by Goffman, are examined in the context of autistic individuals undergoing the job interview process, together with the concept of ‘emotional labour’ (**3.2-3.3**). In addition, the related concept of normativity is discussed with regard to autistic and other neurodivergent job applicants (**3.4**). The ‘medical’, ‘social’ and ‘social relational’ models of disability are then discussed, with an examination of the particular relevance to Goffman’s theoretical ideas (**3.5 -3.6**). Finally, the chapter draws on both Parts 1 and 2 of the literature review to develop the conceptual framework that gives rise to the research questions central to this thesis **(3.7**).

## 3.2 Recruiting autistic applicants, Goffman’s theory on the presentation of self and ‘impression management’

As indicated in Chapter 2, research has suggested that autistic applicants need to modify their behaviour in order to be successful at interview, and the innate challenge for autistic candidates of engaging in ‘impression management’ forms a central theme of this thesis. To better understand the concept, it is helpful to engage with Goffman’s (1959, p. 203) theory, and the notion that individuals manipulate their appearance and manner to ‘fit in’ with society in order to achieve their aims, based on the collective rules of social behaviour. Goffman argued that one manages – or seeks to manage – the image one conveys; and that one’s actions in a social context are essentially a “*front*” (Goffman, 1959, p. 32). This is created by manipulating one’s appearance (with, for example, particular clothing), manner (facial expressions and demeanour) as well as one’s choice of setting (for example, the physical layout of a room). According to Goffman, we aim to present an idealised image of ourselves through ‘impression management’, although we will have different ‘fronts’ depending on the person with whom we are interacting. We will, for example, vary our behaviour when encountering a friend, a future in-law or prospective employer in order to ‘fit in’ with social expectations and to achieve our aims. based on the collective rules of social behaviour. With reference to the job interview, Goffman argued that “*important consequences for the performer will occur as a result of his conduct (and)… often the interviewer will have to make decisions of far-reaching importance for the interviewee on the sole basis of information gained from the interviewee’s interview performance”* (Goffman, 1959, p. 219).

Using the dramaturgical model, Goffman (1959, p. 114) differentiated between “*backstage*” where one prepares and rehearses a “*performance*”, and “*frontstage*” where one engages with an audience (Goffman, 1959, p. 129). When “*frontstage*”, Goffman argued, it is important both to control one’s presentation and to interpret the cues from one’s audience. A belief in the role one plays is not necessary. It might be for personal gain, for the benefit of others, or be completely genuine but the vast majority of performances, according to Goffman, are on a spectrum from sincerity to cynicism. Engagement with role play is however, essential, as society in general conforms to such expectations.

An important element of ‘impression management’ is the concealment of certain aspects of one’s ‘natural’ behaviour that may detract from the impression one wishes to convey. When interacting with others, however, indicators such as the tone of voice, personal mannerisms and inappropriate dress may betray one’s intended appearance. Moreover, Goffman argued that*: “performers can stop giving expressions, but cannot stop giving them off,”* (Goffman, 1959, p. 111). In other words, verbal communication alone does not determine the impression we make on others; it is merely part of the social interaction we use to convey a particular ‘reality’ to others (Geva, 2012). In the specific case of autistic people, many may find it impossible to assume an acceptable self-promotion ‘front’ that is markedly different from their ‘backstage’ self. And in those cases where they might strive to ‘hide’ their condition and initially appear ‘neurotypical’ at interview, certain traits such as hand movements, unusual prosody (intonation) or repetition of words and phrases may compromise their superficial appearance of ‘normality’. Goffman’s work has informed later debates on ‘situated identity theory’ which helps to explain how people initiate interactions and also guide and anticipate the course of that interaction**.** However,those who subscribe to ‘situated identity theory’ argue that whereas Goffman assumed that people *“negotiate their respective identities before interaction*… (and) *continue to reinforce or renegotiate the original transaction throughout the encounter*”, in their view “*some kind of ‘situated identity’ must be established and maintained as a prerequisite for social conduct.*” (Alexander and Lauderdale, 1977, p. 225). In both cases it should be noted that there is an assumption that the individual has the capacity to adapt their presentation or to assume a particular identity, which may be less likely in the case of autistic people.

## 3.3 Impression management, ‘performing’ at interview and emotional labour

Goffman recognised that projecting one’s ‘best’ self in order to engage with others ‘front of stage’ can be stressful. The effort expended in social and professional interaction was further explored by Hochschild in her examination of ‘emotional labour’ (Hochschild, 1979), which relates to the mental and emotional effort in fulfilling the requirements of a job. Work that requires emotional management typically includes occupations that involve face-to-face or oral communication with the public (Hochschild, 1983), such as the service sector, where a high level of responsiveness to the customer’s needs is expected. Workers regulate their feelings when interacting with customers, colleagues and superiors by displaying emotions that they do not feel at the time, for example smiling or adopting a certain tone of voice. Known as ‘surface acting’, such behaviour requires a change of outward appearance. ‘Deep acting’, on the other hand, involves the suppression of one’s true state of physical or mental wellbeing, such as frustration or discomfort (Chi and Grandey, 2019; Grandey, Houston and Avery, 2019). In such cases one is required to empathise and ‘put oneself in the other person’s shoes’, which for those on the autism spectrum will often pose a significant challenge given that many may lack a ‘Theory of Mind’ (Hochschild, 1983; McCance *et al.*, 2013; Grandey *et al.,* 2019). Consideration of the impact of emotional labour has been extended over the years to the disabled given that, in general, the processes, culture and physical environment of the workplace are designed primarily for the able-bodied (Wilton, 2008).

Parallels may be drawn with autistic people undergoing a conventional job interview. To overcome their innate difficulty in, for example, sustaining eye contact, engaging in social conversation and understanding non-verbal cues, they need to expend both mental and physical effort to comply with employers’ expectations. Indeed, Wilton (2008) recognises that whereas those without a physical or neurological disability have a prima facie choice whether to comply with, or reject, the emotional demands of a particular job, for disabled workers the emotional performance may simply not be possible. Critically, even where a worker would like to comply, the nature of their disability militates against their capacity to deliver the ‘emotional performance’ required.

For autistic people, the strain of ‘performing’ in everyday interactions and adopting neurotypical behaviour is referenced in the literature as well as in a number of personal accounts of autistic people (Beck *et al.*, 2020; Schneid and Raz, 2020). Daniel Lightwing, the renowned mathematician, has said: “*When you have Asperger’s, you are putting on a mask and trying to pretend you are normal…”* (Feinstein, 2018, p. 175)*.* ‘Masking’ or ‘camouflaging’ is a strategy whereby some autistic people may make a conscious effort to assume ‘normal’ behaviour by observing and imitating others’ behaviour. They observe mannerisms and learn speech patterns and ‘social scripts’, including the telling of jokes. At the same time, they conceal their true personality by, for example, restricting conversation on their favourite subject or guarding against their tendency to stand too close to people (proprioception) (Lai *et al.*, 2017).

The capacity for those with autism to succeed in ‘impression management’ may be further inhibited by their inherent disability in relation to ‘Theory of Mind’ (see **2.3.1** above). The autistic person may not have the same facility as neurotypical individuals to interpret, and continually adjust to, the changing nature of social interactions. Efforts to give a ‘neurotypical’ performance in society may therefore have a chronically debilitating effect on autistic people (Bargiela, Steward and Mandy, 2016; Corbett *et al.*, 2020). For that reason, some individuals, having considered the advantages and disadvantages of such an action, decide to disclose their condition: “*Pretending to be like you guys is exhausting. You have to keep it up all the time or you’re not going to get anywhere*” (Feinstein, 2018, p. 109). Goffman directly addresses the dilemma faced by those with a ‘hidden disability’ and their decision to disclose: “*To display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when, and where*” (Goffman, 1974, p. 42). In recent years more research has examined the dilemma of autistic people who have struggled with whether to disclose their condition and risk possible negative reactions particularly from employers, or deal with the emotional stress of concealment (Sarrett, 2017; Huang *et al.*, 2022).

## 3.4 Normativity and neurodivergence

Goffman’s work engages with the idea of ‘normality’ and the challenges associated with needing to project a *normative* identity and conduct. The definition of ‘normativity’ varies according to the academic discipline to which it relates. In the social sciences, however, it generally refers to the notion that in society, certain behaviours or outcomes are regarded as necessary, desirable or acceptable, while others are viewed as undesirable or unacceptable (Wedgwood, 2007; Finlay, 2019). Its basic premise, therefore, is that society in general will make a value judgement on others whose appearance or behaviour falls outside accepted ‘norms’ or ‘standards’. Such judgements are subject to change as society’s attitudes evolve. Views on homosexuality or single mothers, for example, have undergone radical changes in recent decades (Golombok, 2015). Nevertheless, at any point in time, the prevailing culture of what is ‘acceptable’, ‘necessary’ or ‘correct’ behaviour may impact profoundly on an individual’s opportunities to engage with society, including their employment prospects (CIPD, 2022a).

Normative expectations about behaviour, communication and social interaction may create barriers in particular for neurodivergent individuals, who are estimated to comprise some 15%-20% of the population (Stanton, no date). Consequently, they are less likely to be accepted by mainstream society, especially in the workplace. The expectation that people should make eye contact during conversation with colleagues, for example, may be challenging for autistic people, many of whom find such interaction disabling. Similarly, those with ADHD or autism may find it difficult to work effectively in an open plan environment where there is noise and distraction. Employers are generally more understanding of those with physical impairments and are more likely to accommodate, for example, people who are wheelchair users or those with a hearing impairment, and less likely to employ someone with Tourette’s syndrome, a condition of the nervous system that causes uncontrollable movements (Adam, Brown and Dong, 2023). These individuals, whose involuntary ‘tics’ may be viewed as ‘undesirable’ or offensive (‘tourette in the workplace, getting and keeping a job’, no date) were found to have a ‘problematic employment history’ in 52% of cases, according to a survey of those with the condition (Palmer and Stern, 2015). The official data in the UK also confirm that those with a neurodivergent disability such as autism, epilepsy or ADHD are much less likely to be employed than those with a physical impairment (Adam, Brown and Dong, 2023). Similar findings have been reported in overseas studies. A survey of Swedish participants for example, found that *“the probability of being employed was highest among respondents with hearing disabilities, while respondents with psychological disabilities were least likely to be employed*“ (Boman *et al.*, 2015, p. 116), although “*psychological disabilities*” were not explicitly defined. Significantly, it was reported that “*higher education did not increase employment opportunities for respondents with impaired work ability*” (Boman *et al.*, 2015, p. 116). As a consequence, such individuals may be excluded from the workplace, and a vicious cycle may emerge where a lack of opportunity and support reinforces negative stereotypes and further marginalises them.

The literature has shown that in the service industries - which account for four out every five jobs in the UK - there is an emphasis on presentation and ‘soft’ skills (see 2.4.2) to provide “*positive customer experiences”* (Roozen and Katidis, 2019). Customer service assistants are required to have the ‘right’ look and ‘appropriate’ personality which may be interpreted as exhibiting neurotypical behaviours (Nickson *et al.*, 2017). The particular characteristics sought by retailers appear to vary somewhat according to whether the goods for sale are at the ‘luxury’ end of the market or are more basic commodities for everyday needs, such as groceries. For ‘high-end’ retailers, it was found that the aesthetics employees were required to demonstrate included “*deportment, style, accent, voice and attractiveness*”, *where “looking good” and “sounding right” were their primary requirements*” (Williams and Connell, 2010, p. 350). The rationale underlying this was that sales assistants would need to ‘relate’ to the shoppers in order to sell expensive branded items to affluent customers. Elsewhere, however, there is also an emphasis on ‘relating’ to customers, where descriptions such as “*friendly” “*‘*sociable”*, “*excellent communication”* and “*team worker”* are used to define suitable employees in the retail sector (Team, 2021, page 6). Consequently, disabled candidates who do not fit the mould of the physically able-bodied, or neurodivergent individuals who may present differently in manner or communication, are less likely to be hired (Nickson *et al.*, 2012), even though they may be able to provide a polite service and satisfy the customer’s needs.

As noted above, society’s attitudes change over time, and it is not clear if the under-representation of disabled, including neurodivergent, individuals in shops and offices is partly attributable to employers’ attitudes that may no longer reflect society’s expectations in general. Also, it is interesting to note in relation to supermarket chains that, while retailers have certain views about the engaging qualities necessary in their customer service staff, many are rapidly installing self-service machines that discourage any human interaction (Guha and Grewal, 2022; PricewaterhouseCoopers, no date).

In recent years, certain market sectors have advocated the recruitment of autistic employees for specific qualities that are seen to bring commercial advantage. Indeed, there is now a common reference to the ‘autism advantage’ (Bury *et al.*, 2020) to indicate commercial benefits from employing those with autism in, for example, AI and technology sectors that require skills such as pattern recognition, software testing and a capacity for systems building (Baron-Cohen *et al.,* 2009). Others argue, however, that there is no scientific evidence to support this as a general phenomenon and may contribute to the collective stereotyping of this particular group of people by failing to recognise the heterogeneity of individuals (Walkowiak, 2021; see also **2.7** above).

## 3.5 Defining and critiquing the ‘medical’, ‘social’ and ‘social relational’ models of disability

When examining a condition such as autism, it is important to engage with debates on the ‘medical’ ‘social’ and ‘social relational’ models of disability (Shakespeare and Watson, 2001; Sang, Calvard and Remnant, 2022). These provide different perspectives on attitudes to the nature of disability and in this respect are relevant in an examination of Goffman’s theory of impression management, which explores society’s expectations of how people should adapt their behaviour in different social settings.

The ‘medical model’ asserts that disability is a specific impairment (physical, mental or sensory) or combination of impairments that must be remedied by medical or other treatments in order to effect ‘normality’ in an individual (Fisher and Goodley, 2007). This individualistic model of disability focuses on curing disability in individuals and reflects an unequal power relationship between ‘patient’ and the medical professions. It generally presupposes a benevolent society where people will have access to high levels of healthcare and services to assist them in this objective. Nevertheless, it emphasises the need for individuals to take personal responsibility to ‘correct’ an impairment in order to access ‘normal’ society with the overriding assumption that *“those who are ‘more able’ are ‘more includable’”* (Shyman, 2016, p. 367). This poses a number of philosophical questions: who are the arbiters of ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’? And should those who are at ease with their ‘impairment’ be required to undergo remedial treatment to participate fully in society (Shakespeare, 2010; Shyman, 2016)? Moreover, as there are clinical limitations to the model in that medical science is not sufficiently advanced to ‘cure’ many lifelong conditions such as blindness, cerebral palsy and autism, some individuals would be permanently excluded from ‘normal’ society. The weaknesses in this approach prompted criticism of the model as *“paternalistic, inhumane and reductionist”* (Shah and Mountain, 2007, p. 375). Critics argued that it could lead to the pathologisation of the disabled (‘What is *wrong* with this person?’) who were seen through their impairment, rather than as people with individual skills and strengths, thus reinforcing negative stereotypes and stigma (Oliver, 1983). Moreover, it encouraged a passive and dependent approach to disability as individuals who were excluded from many aspects of society were seen more as recipients of care and support, rather than as active individuals who participated in, and contributed to, society (Wendell, 1996; Shyman, 2016).

The weaknesses in the ‘medical model’ gave rise in time to the ‘social model’ of disability. By contrast, the ‘social model’ which emerged from the activities of the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) in the 1970s asserts that disability is caused by the way society is organised (Oliver, 1983; Areheart, 2008): individuals may have innate or acquired ‘impairments’ but it is society’s oppression and failure to accommodate their needs that renders them disabled (Oliver, 2004). It should be noted that in its original conception the ‘social model’ considered only physical impairment, focusing on unsuitable housing, inaccessible transport and office buildings, but its philosophy and political influence gained momentum in the 1980s and 1990s such that it became *“a practical tool not a theory”* (Oliver, 2004, p. 30) that was used for the championing of all disability rights.

In recent years critics have commented on the weaknesses of the ‘social model’ in that it minimises the experience of impairment in the daily lives of disabled people (Shakespeare, 2010). Focusing solely on society’s need to remove barriers, it fails to acknowledge the potential for medical intervention to ameliorate the quality of life of the chronically ill and does not adequately recognise the conflicting needs of different groups. Moreover, in real life a distinction between ‘impairment’ (medical) and ‘disability’ (social) is not straightforward, particularly in the area of mental health. What barriers, for example, is society responsible for in the case of the clinically depressed (Shakespeare, 2010)? Financial constraints – even in the most benevolent of societies – also pose a practical limit on the degree to which society can place disabled people on an equal footing with the non-disabled. It is interesting to note that in re-visiting the ‘social model’ 30 years after his seminal book on the subject, Oliver (2013) addressed his critics by refuting the notion that he had ever subscribed to the view that “*the social model was an all-encompassing framework within which everything that happens to disabled people could be understood or explained*” (Oliver, 2013, p. 1024). Its limitations had been apparent to him from the outset, he argued, and restated his view that the ‘social model’ was a practical, not a theoretical concept - “*a tool to improve people’s lives*” (Oliver, 2013, p. 1025).

In recognition of the limitations of both the ‘medical’ and ‘social’ models, there has emerged the ‘social relational model’ which presents a more complex picture of disability (Shakespeare and Watson, 2001; Thomas, 2004a; Reindal, 2008). While not contradicting the principle of the ‘social model’ that disability is primarily created by societal barriers, it acknowledges the fundamental importance of individual impairments and argues that disability is shaped by the interaction of impairments, social relations and power dynamics (Thomas, 2004b). Central to the concept is the idea that impairments and social relations interact to create disability, rather than being separate entities, and that disabled people experience systemic disadvantage and marginalisation as a result of their impairments. Such negative societal attitudes and discrimination impact in turn on the mental and emotional wellbeing of these individuals.

Both the ‘social’ and the ‘social relational’ models advocate social change, therefore, but the latter stresses the need to address societal power structures and to empower disabled people. In their study of human resource management practices in academic institutions, Sang, Calvard and Remnant (2022) argued that the systemic practices in place may adversely affect disabled academics by excluding, discriminating against or stigmatising people with impairments or chronic health conditions. In interviews with 75 disabled academics in the UK, they found that “*organisational practices, some of which are intended to ‘accommodate’ disabled people, discursively construct and shape disability for people with ‘impairments’ or chronic health conditions*” (Sang, Calvard and Remnant, 2022, p. 723 ). Examples included performance management systems that measured disabled people with debilitating illnesses against normative standards of productivity and excellence, which led to greater stress and anxiety for the individuals. Also, there existed a “*culture of marketisation*” (Sang, Calvard and Remnant, 2022, p. 724) and profitability that took precedence over diversity and inclusion with a detrimental impact on disabled academics, who often had to rely on their own efforts, and source their own support, to overcome their particular disadvantages (Sang, Calvard and Remnant, 2022). Reflecting the views of Oliver (2013) above, the authors concluded that systemic changes in practices and attitudes were called for, rather than a tendency to ‘fix’ problems on an ad hoc basis. Greater transparency was also called for, and closer engagement with disabled academics to ensure that any proposed changes were both desirable and practicable (Sang, Calvard and Remnant, 2022).

The need for direct engagement with disabled people whose lives may be affected by any proposed changes – however well-intentioned – is gaining more recognition in certain quarters from those who are in a position to bring about systemic change and improve opportunities for disabled groups. An example with regard to autistic communities, is the government’s review of autism and employment begun in 2023 (Department for Work and Pensions, 2023) where, rather than, as in the past, relying on non-autistic representatives of autistic support groups to articulate their needs, the review has additionally solicited the views of autistic adults for their lived experiences and insights. It is too early to judge whether the participants’ views have been adequately noted but it is a step in the right direction by giving voice to those who will be most affected by any changes to current employment practices.

In the case of the government consultation, autistic people may have the right to express their views but not the power to effect change. The social relational model stresses the importance of the power dynamics and – by extension – the need to understand any vested interests in the status quo. In this regard, Oliver (2013) was highly critical of some of the major disability charities which he claimed were “*driven by self-interest*” (Oliver, 2013, p. 1026) and needed disabled people “*to be dependent and tragic, otherwise there is no justification for their existence*” (Oliver, 2017, p. 15). Whereas their original mission in many cases had been to campaign for more legal rights and greater inclusivity, he regarded them now more as exploiters of disabled people. His criticism extended even to user-led charities for their lack of political activism at a time when the government took credit for improving the rights of the disabled while reducing some of their services and benefits. In his view, the disabled need to take collective action to bring about systemic change and “*insist that our personal troubles are public issues that need to be resolved”* (Oliver, 2017, p. 18). In advocating that disability organisations should be controlled by the disabled instead of being “*about us but definitely not controlled by us”* (Oliver, 2017, p. 6)*,* Oliver appears to have moved somewhat from the perspective of the ‘social model’ of disability - where responsibility for removing barriers passes from the individual to society - to that of the ‘social relational model’, where the disabled are encouraged to address more pro-actively the power dynamics that continue to limit their opportunities. While the social relational model may be seen to build on the social model by recognising that disability is a complex phenomenon that arises from the interaction of impairment, social interaction and power dynamics, it may nevertheless be argued that – like the ‘social model’ – it may not address sufficiently the diversity of society and how an individual’s impairment may intersect with other aspects of their life, such as age, gender, race or sexuality.

The ‘social relational’ model is the most appropriate in an examination of the challenges faced by autistic individuals, for whom social and cultural barriers – as well as their innate condition – may be significantly disabling. As a lifelong condition, autism does not lend itself to the 'medical model’, which would regard it as a deficiency requiring treatment. The ‘social model’, on the other hand, while not ascribing blame or advocating remediation in those with autism, is more focussed on structural barriers and does not address sufficiently the complexity of the lived experience of autistic people engaging with society. Difficulty with eye contact, proprioception, hypersensitivity to certain aspects of the environment and communication problems, for example, may impact on the autistic individual’s ability to engage with neurotypical people, which in turn may give rise to social oppression as a result of prejudice or misunderstanding. The examination of the factors impacting on autistic people seeking employment is therefore undertaken, in this thesis, through the conceptual lens of the ‘social relational model’ (Martin, 2013).

## 3.6 The models of disability and Goffman’s theory of impression management

The previous section explained and critiqued the different models of disability, while this section examines the link between Goffman’s theory of impression management and each of the three models.

In section 3.2 above, it was explained that, according to Goffman, people manage and adapt their appearance, manner and (where possible) their setting according to their audience, with each social situation requiring a different ‘performance’. The bespoke ‘performance’ is designed to present the individual in the best possible light, conforming to society’s expectations but is swiftly abandoned when the person is no longer in view of their audience. From this arose Goffman’s dramaturgical model and the proposition that people are like actors ‘front of stage’ using various techniques or ‘impression management’ to convey the best version of themselves to their ’audience’ in order to gain acceptance and further their goals. Once the performance is complete, they move ‘backstage’ where they can relax and let down their guard, out of sight of the critical view of others, and revert more to their true selves. Goffman recognised that acting out these different roles is demanding, and individuals need to be constantly on their guard and to practise “*expressive control*” (Goffman, 1959, p. 33) when under social scrutiny.

Central to the theory of ‘impression management’ is the notion of normative behaviour (see 3.4 above). Goffman refers to the “*moral values… pertaining to fashions, custom, and matters of taste, to politeness and decorum, to ultimate ends and normative restrictions*…”(Goffman, 1959, p. 153) that govern communities and establishments. In other words, people need to ‘fit in’ with society’s expectations and gain acceptance as they carve out a path to achieve their personal objectives. Proponents of the social model of disability also recognise the need to ‘conform’ to society’s expectations, but from their perspective, it is the actions (or lack of action) of society as a whole that cause the physical, environmental and social barriers that lead to the exclusion of disabled people (Oliver, 1983). While cognisant of the ‘front’ that they are expected to present to society, therefore, disabled people are unable to enact this in many cases. Goffman's framework, on the other hand, places the responsibility for presentation on the individual, failing to acknowledge the many barriers that societal expectations may create for the disabled population. In this respect, Goffman is more aligned with the ‘medical model’ where the onus is on the individual to assume personal responsibility to bring about change – to ‘fix’ themselves – in order to conform to the ‘norm’ and participate fully in society.

Disabled people may wish to engage in impression management with the aim of being more integrated in society and accessing the opportunities that are available to non-disabled people but those who subscribe to the ‘social model’ of disability would argue that the failure to accommodate their needs disadvantages them, sometimes from the outset. For example, inadequate physical or educational support through a lack of assistive equipment, transport or special needs services may limit their physical, social or academic development, such that they are unable to fulfil the potential they might otherwise have achieved without their condition. Perhaps of equal, if not greater, importance, are the challenges they face in overcoming negative attitudes and prejudice – the attitudinal barriers – that may be directed at them, particularly in relation to employment. An employer may, for instance, enable a wheelchair user to access the premises for interview by the provision of ramps or through physical adaptations to stairs or doorways but the latter has no option other than to present as a disabled individual. Similarly, an autistic individual’s attempts to present as neurotypical may be compromised by a lack of eye contact or difficulty in communicating, as will someone with Tourette’s syndrome who displays involuntary movements. Consequently, the opportunity to ‘manipulate their appearance’ – as advanced by Goffman – is simply not available to them, and the individual may be exposed to possible prejudice, stereotyping or discrimination as a result of their innate condition. In this sense, both Goffman and the social model recognise the importance of social interaction in shaping individual experiences but while Goffman analyses how people actively manage their behaviour to achieve certain outcomes from their audience, the ‘social model’ highlights the physical barriers and social attitudes that reinforce their sense of impairment and disadvantage.

Having considered the social model and Goffman’s work, it is perhaps more instructive to consider the ‘social relational model’ which builds on the ‘social model’ by recognising the interaction of impairments, social relations and power dynamics. Both Goffman and the ‘social relational model’ of disability acknowledge the importance of power dynamics in social interactions. Goffman argues that it is those with the greater power who control the setting and audience for a performance, laying down the rules of behaviour for each participant. Social class is referenced as a significant determinant of presentation since those of a higher standing influence the protocols for the lower social strata. Interestingly, while those of a lower social position are expected to defer to those of a higher order, they are discouraged from aping their ‘superiors’ as it is deemed unacceptable to appropriate the appearance and behaviours of a higher social status (Goffman, 1959). This illustrates yet another challenge in the art of ‘impression management’ as individuals who are seeking to achieve their aims must also negotiate their assigned position in society. Such nuances of behaviour are likely to be challenging for autistic people. The ‘social relational model’ of disability similarly recognises the role of power dynamics in shaping the lives and opportunities of disabled people. In this case, it is non-disabled groups who may be seen as the dominant force that control the experiences of the disabled. As disabled groups are often under-represented in decision-making and policy forums, the power imbalance may lead to attitudes, practices and policies that fail to meet their needs, or exclude and marginalise them. There are, however, distinct differences between the ‘social relational model’ of disability and Goffman in the approach to achieving one’s desired outcomes. Supporters of the social relational model advocate a stratagem of positive action, openly challenging discrimination and asserting their right to integration with policies and structures that promote inclusion and acceptance (Darcy *et al.*, 2023). By contrast, Goffman’s framework relies on a performance of manipulation, self-monitoring and adaptation in social interactions as the key to influencing people and achieving one’s goals.

A further way of relating Goffman’s work to the different models of disability is through considering the concept of social reality. Here, we can reflect on Goffman’s analysis of self-presentation, and the ‘social relational model’ of disability. In Goffman’s exploration of impression management, people use verbal and non-verbal actions to try to create the desired impression or ‘front’ that will steer the audience towards their intended goal. The performer is at pains to present a version of themselves by “*accentuating certain facts and concealing others*” (Goffman, 1959, p. 43). However, this tends to ignore the objective reality of power relations – the performer is trying to present an ‘ideal’ image of themselves, when arguably they should not have to do this. Similar to Goffman, the social model of disability acknowledges that disabled people might be oppressed through culture, religion, education or the media. Supporters of the ‘social relational model’ seek to challenge society’s perceptions of disability that create barriers for them, with the ultimate aim of bringing about a more inclusive society that provides access for all. It is important to note that Goffman’s theory of ‘impression management’ relates to neurotypical behaviour in social interactions and does not consider the experiences of individuals with a neurodivergent condition such as autism. Goffman presupposes, for example, that all individuals have social awareness and make a conscious and deliberate effort to manage their behaviour to effect the best outcome. In the case of autistic individuals, however, many may lack the ‘Theory of Mind’ and social understanding that underpins such behaviour. Similarly, Goffman’s work does not address the innate barriers to social acceptance that autistic people are likely to experience in social and professional settings due to their sensory sensitivities, difficulty with eye contact and differences in cognitive processing. These characteristics are likely to make it challenging for autistic individuals to navigate social situations, as might be assumed within Goffman's framework.

## 3.7 Theoretical framework and research questions

The preceding literature review has led to the identification of a number of research gaps. In Part 1 (chapter 2), the existing research on autism and employment for autistic people was explored. It was noted that whilst some studies have recognised the innate difficulties of autistic people with job interviews (Müller *et al.*, 2003) – and indeed the limitations of the traditional interview itself as an effective means of selection (Macan, 2009) – there is little understanding of autistic people’s views on possible alternatives to this process. Studies that lean more towards the ‘social model’ of disability suggest adaptations that employers might make to the conventional interview in order to accommodate autistic people but generally fall short of questioning whether this method – in whatever modified form – is a fair or, indeed, effective way of assessing those on the autism spectrum for sustainable employment. Further studies are needed that explore with autistic participants (as well as employers and other stakeholders) not only the barriers presented by the conventional interview but, more importantly, alternative forms of assessment that would enable them to demonstrate their ability to perform the job description.

In addition, the literature review identified a number of generative mechanisms that may impact on outcomes for autistic applicants, such as the current labour market, the legal framework and recent developments in HR recruitment practices. The current labour market, for example, reflects the significant changes in the sectoral distribution of employment since World War Two. During this period, there has been a rapid decline in the primary (mainly agriculture and mining) and secondary (mainly manufacturing and construction) sectors, with a sharp increase in those in the tertiary sector (services). As a result, more than four out of five workers in the UK are currently engaged in the service industries. The significance of this for autistic applicants is that they are seeking to enter the job market at a time when employers place great importance on ‘soft’ or transferable skills. These skills are generally considered to relate to social or interpersonal skills, such as effective communication and an aptitude for teamwork, and are sought after in the retail sector as well as hospitality, leisure and cultural industries (Hurrell, 2016). There are no official data on the types of employment in which autistic people are engaged but research indicates that employers have been less likely to recruit autistic people in customer services where ‘soft’ skills are viewed as an important element of the job (Feinstein 2018).

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| Regarding legislation, a significant number of changes envisaged by the Autism Act (2009) and its autism strategy have failed to come to fruition, in particular the lack of engagement with employers to improve autism employment. Autistic people also currently rely on the provisions of the Equality Act (2010) for ‘reasonable adjustments’ to assist them through the recruitment process to compensate for any disadvantages they may experience due to their impairment (Equality Act, 2010). These provisions, however, have required legal interpretation on occasion, for example, in relation to common forms of standardised testing used in recruitment selection that were found to discriminate against autistic candidates. The growth in AI software for hiring purposes (see 2.9 above), including video-recorded interviews assessed by algorithms, raises the question of whether the current legal oversight is sufficient with regard to these systems. There is also the issue of redress, if any, that is open to candidates who may wish to challenge the fairness and transparency of these processes, as employment legislation appears not to have kept pace with the rapid advances in AI. The literature review has indicated that the growth in AI recruitment software to select applicants is likely to impact adversely on autistic people. There are also possible wider implications for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion as these methods are likely to adversely affect many groups who are under-represented in the data such as females, ethnic minorities, disabled and neurodivergent individuals (Guo *et al*., 2019). The potential for bias extends also to AI video hiring programmes where facial recognition tools may work less well on people with darker skin tones or those with certain conditions such as Down’s Syndrome, Bell’s Palsy or Parkinson’s disease, whose profiles are likely to fall outside the parameters set by the algorithms used to assess facial expressions (Guo *et al.*, 2019). Against this background, the main theoretical underpinning for this research is Goffman’s notion of ‘impression management’ (Goffman, 1959) which advocates that individuals are able to adapt and adjust their behaviour to engage with a particular audience, such as a job applicant engaging with an interviewer. Earlier in this chapter, this work was examined alongside the ‘social model’ of disability which accepts that individuals may have innate or acquired ‘impairments’ but are rendered ‘disabled’ by society’s oppression and failure to accommodate their needs in everyday life. The ‘social relational model’ of disability, while not contradicting the principle of the ‘social model’ that disability is primarily created by societal barriers, presents a more complex picture of impairment and social interaction, recognising the influences of impairment and oppression, and was therefore used to inform this research study. The analysis of how models of disability relate to Goffman’s work drew attention to a gap in research which this study seeks to address: the lack of current understanding of the unique position of the autistic person regarding Goffman and models of disability, given the innate profile of autism and the related difficulties of ‘Theory of Mind’. This study also seeks to extend work on how the concept of stereotyping can be applied to autistic individuals. The influence of bias in recruiting and selecting job applicants is widely reported in terms of age, gender and race but much less is known about the impact on those with a disability, including those with autism (Lipton *et al.*, 1991; King *et al.*, 2006; Posthuma and Campion, 2009). The influence of stereotyping has an important bearing on outcomes for autistic people attending interview. In recent years autism has received much greater – although not necessarily more balanced – exposure in the media with the result that preconceptions may be held about the suitability of autistic people in the workplace, which could be positive or negative, depending on their perceived skills. This study therefore examines possible preconceptions held by employers, some of whom may regard autistic employees as exceptionally able in, for example, coding and software skills, and therefore a potential asset to the organisation (Wang, 2014; Annabi, Sundaresan and Zolyomi, 2017). Others, however, may view them as socially awkward individuals with poor communication skills who might be difficult to integrate in the workplace (Nesbitt, 2000; Chen *et al.*, 2015). This in turn raises the question of the autistic person’s position when assessed by employers in relation to person-job and person-organisation fit, which is also examined.The gaps identified in the literature review have therefore led to the following research questions:1. What are the main generative mechanisms that help to explain the low levels of employment among disabled people, and autistic people in particular?2. Which selection processes might best enable autistic applicants to demonstrate their suitability for a job, and to what extent are employers willing to adapt their selection methods for autistic applicants?3. To what extent do stereotyping, person-job fit and person-organisation fit influence the recruitment process for autistic job applicants?4. To what extent and how do autistic applicants engage in impression management and with what outcomes?5. How can analysis of the recruitment experiences of autistic applicants aid our understanding of the interaction between the 'social relational model’ and Goffman’s theory of impression management?6. How might recruitment policy and practice be changed in order to facilitate the recruitment of autistic applicants, and how might such changes be influenced by the legislative, economic and socio-cultural context?  |  |

# Chapter 4: Methodology and Methods

## 4.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses the methodology and methods deployed in the research. In relation to the former, ontology (one’s belief regarding the nature of reality) and epistemology (the framework within which the researcher acquires knowledge) are discussed in **4.2**, together with the reasons for adopting critical realism.

Reflexivity, which examines one’s own beliefs, judgements and practices during the study process in order to assess their possible influences on one’s research, is addressed in **4.3**. The rationale underpinning the research design, including the objective of triangulating the data by interviewing employers and professional stakeholders - in addition to autistic job applicants - is explained in **4.4.** The nature of the research, which included data relating to, and interviews with, vulnerable adults, raised a number of ethical issues. In addressing these, I had regard both to the University of Sheffield’s own ethics guidelines and those drawn up by *Shaping Autism Research* (endorsed by the National Autistic Society) to create an ‘enabling environment’ for autistic interviewees, and these are related in **4.5.** Section **4.6** records the methods used in the research, which involved purposive sampling in recruiting the three participatory groups, and semi-structured interviews (**4.6.1-4.6.3**). The process of data collection and approach to data analysis are explained in **4.6.4** and **4.6.5**, together with a breakdown of the thematic template used to interpret the qualitative data (**Table 4**). The analysis of the sample data is covered in **4.6.6** and **Tables 5-9.** The methods proposed at the design stage underwent a number of changes as a result of the restrictions imposed following the outbreak of Covid-19, and these are outlined in subsection **4.6.7**. Finally, there is a brief evaluation of the profile of the data sample in relation to the objectives of the thesis (**4.6.8**).

## 4.2 Methodology

***4.2.1 Ontological position***

Methodology refers to the individual’s philosophical approach to research which in turn informs the research design, the data collection methods and, ultimately, the contribution to knowledge (Edmondson and Mcmanus, 2007). In defining the philosophical approach, it is necessary first to establish one’s ontological position, which addresses the researcher’s personal belief regarding the nature of reality: “*the nature of the social world and what can be known about it*” (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003, p. 1). The ontological perspective ranges broadly from those who subscribe to the view that there is one reality that is incontrovertible, measurable and observable to all – ‘realism’ – to those who believe that there are multiple realities depending on context, culture and experience – ‘relativism’. In the case of the latter, knowledge is relative to who we are, and how we acquire our understanding, so there is no single ‘truth’, and different perceptions of reality are of equal value (Bryman and Bell, 2007).

Within this ontological spectrum lies the perspective of critical realism that emphasises the importance of understanding the structures that generate events. Thus, Bhaskar argued that much of reality exists and operates independently of our awareness or knowledge of it; and that it is only possible “*to understand –* ***and change*** *– the social world if we identify the structures at work that generate those events*” (Bhaskar, 2010, p. 2). Realities may be influenced by, for example, the organisational context, by the individual's socialisation or by institutions such as the media. Thus, in relation to this thesis, access to work for autistic people may be influenced by multiple factors of which the individual is unaware such as power relations within an organisation, the portrayal of autistic people in reality television programmes or previous associations an employer may have had with an autistic colleague or social contact. As the aim of the research is to understand the influences of impression management, stereotyping, person-job fit and person-organisation fit on outcomes for autistic job applicants, and has the ultimate objective of effecting change - where beneficial - a critical realist approach best reflects the nature of the project. The author's view is that the world is subject to change but that there are limits to what is achievable. This is consistent with a critical realism approach which acknowledges that, while change is possible, it occurs only within the boundaries set by underlying structures and mechanisms and cannot ignore the fundamental constraints of the real world.

Critical realism espouses ‘generative mechanisms’ to explain the forces or processes that shape social events and outcomes. These mechanisms may relate to social structures, organisations, belief systems or indeed anything that may give rise to a causal effect and observable patterns. The literature review indicated a number of ‘generative mechanisms’ in relation to outcomes for autistic job applicants. These include the current labour market demands (**2.4.1**), the transferable or ‘soft’ skills sought by employers (**2.4.2**); the stereotyping of the autistic condition in the recruitment process (**2.8**); and changes in HR recruitment practices that rely increasingly on technology (**2.9**). Further, it is argued that these mechanisms, while seen through the lens of the autistic job applicant, may have wider application to other disabled and minority groups (**2.9.1**).

***4.2.2 Epistemological position***

Having established an ontological perspective, epistemology defines the researcher’s relationship with the research (Edmonson and McManus, 2007) and research participants. It sets out a framework for the nature and sources of data to be collected, from which knowledge may be acquired. There is a close link between ontology and epistemology, with the latter broadly categorised as either a ‘positivist’ approach, where knowledge is limited to facts, and takes no account of emotions, thoughts or ideas, or an ‘interpretivist’ approach in which differing perceptions, experience and context lead to multiple truths. Critical realism, however, situates itself between positivism and interpretivism (Archer, 1998) and consequently does not align itself solely with either of these two paradigms. Whilst acknowledging that social interaction needs interpretative understanding, it also recognises the benefits of a quantitative approach in some cases. Thus, critical realism forms a bridge between quantitative and qualitative studies (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009) and encourages a more flexible methodological approach.

In relation to this research, the literature review showed differing perceptions of the nature of autism: some employers viewed autistic employees as gifted in IT-related skills, and therefore a potential asset to their organisation (Wang, 2014; Annabi, Sundaresan and Zolyomi, 2017); others viewed them primarily as socially awkward individuals with poor communication skills who might be difficult to integrate in the workplace (Nesbitt, 2000; Chen *et al.*, 2015). A further group – who perhaps had family members or had previously worked with those on the autism spectrum – might believe there are significant variations in the characteristics and performance of these individuals. Exposure to different people with autism will therefore give rise to different realities for those engaged in the job selection process. An interpretivist approach was therefore adopted to explore the perspective of the subjects (both employer and job applicant) engaged in the process, and the structures within which they operated (Bryman and Bell, 2007).

For research that is centred on those who are defined as ‘disabled’, it is also relevant to reflect on the ‘medical’, ‘social’ and ‘social relational’ models of disability. The first states that problems arising from disability should be remedied by medical means, with a view to ‘normalising’ behaviour such that it will be acceptable to those without disability. The lifelong condition of autism is not, however, susceptible to a ‘cure’ and therefore does not lend itself to the ‘medical model’. The ‘social’ model, by contrast, focuses on the need for society to make changes that accommodate the disabled so that they may take their place in the social and work community (Oliver, 1983). The ‘social relational model’, however, builds on the ‘social model’ in that it has regard to the lived experiences of people with impairment, and the social oppression that may arise from their condition. This is of particular relevance to autistic people for whom social and cultural barriers - as well as their innate condition – may be significantly disabling. The research is therefore undertaken through the conceptual lens of the ‘social relational model’ (Martin, 2013).

Autistic participants in this study were of average or above average levels of educational attainment. This group was selected in order to consider employment outcomes against the data available for non-autistic applicants. Educational qualifications were not discussed until the research interview, but it was judged that the study participation process itself, which required reading the Participation Information sheet, completing the consent form and emailing a request to take part in the research were good indicators of the study participant’s competence level. In the end, all but one participant had GCSE qualifications (or equivalent) as a minimum; and the exception, whilst having no formal qualifications at the time, was studying for a degree.

## 4.3 Reflexivity

Reflexivity is the examination of one’s own beliefs, judgements and practices during the study process in order to assess their possible influences on one’s research: “*a habit of awareness and critical thinking regarding (the researcher’s) engagement with… research and its participants*” (King, 2004, p18). The experiences and beliefs of the individual are relevant in this case, as the impetus for undertaking the research lies in the experiences of an autistic relative who, despite a good degree and professional coaching, had failed to secure paid employment more than 18 months after graduation, concluding “I’ll never get a job because I’m no good at interviews”. Unemployment figures for the autistic population are still limited but it was reported in 2021 that only 22% were in paid employment, of which 11 % were full-time (Office for National Statistics, 2021). This led me to reflect not only on the experiences of one individual, and the possible barriers to their employment, but also on the wider question of autistic people’s access to the workplace.

An important consideration when initially deciding on the focus of the research was the degree to which some form of “stigmatisation” on the part of recruiters might affect outcomes. The negative impact of stigmatisation on certain groups in society, including the disabled, are well documented and it was appropriate, therefore, to reflect on whether this was germane to the selection choices made by recruiters - essentially, whether the simple fact of being autistic automatically led to rejection. I concluded, however, that in the case of the job interview, the absence of stigmatisation would not remove the barriers, as there remained the requirement to meet the ‘objective’ criteria that determined outcomes in these cases. In other words, an interviewee who is unable to adopt the code of behaviour and mode of responses expected in the conventional job interview is unlikely to make the grade, let alone emerge as the best candidate, irrespective of how well disposed an interviewer might be towards them. The issue therefore appeared more fundamental. Was the traditional vehicle for assessing job suitability – the conventional job interview – appropriate for people with autism? Individuals with the condition typically struggle to navigate the social, cognitive and communication challenges presented by the traditional interview (Müller *et al.*, 2003). Nevertheless, in most cases they are assessed for a job in the very skills in which they are least likely to perform well, with no opportunity to demonstrate their ability to do the actual job for which they are applying. In conventional interviews, the emphasis would appear to be more on social presentation and the degree to which one can persuade the interviewer of one’s ability to perform well in a job. Much less frequently do applicants have the opportunity to demonstrate, rather than articulate, their expertise (Wang, 2014; Higginbottom, 2017; Kemp, 2018).

A further factor that may have influenced the way in which I have carried out my research, is related to my former employment. My professional career as a Director of the National Audit Office involved the analysis of major government programmes to assess their economy, efficiency and effectiveness. The process involved the analysis of data, as well as interviews with the key individuals responsible for, and impacted by, these programmes. Where deficiencies were identified, recommendations were made to Parliament on how Departments might effect change to achieve their stated aims.

The focus of my research was refined through preliminary academic reading which indicated that earlier research had primarily explored the innate characteristics of autistic applicants that were likely to hinder their ability to perform well at interviews, rather than any alternative methods for assessing their job fitness (López and Keenan, 2014). More recent research has also included some evaluations of experimental programmes, including assistive technology, that sought to train autistic people to adopt ‘neurotypical’ behaviours and responses to improve their performance at job interviews, although there was little independent evidence of their success (Strickland, Coles and Southern, 2013; Smith *et al.*, 2014). My objective, however, was to understand the extent to which, why and how the conventional selection process itself might (or might not) be an effective vehicle for assessing the suitability of an autistic individual for a particular role. Having gained that understanding, and in the event that the data indicated that the conventional interview might not be a suitable means of evaluating job fitness in autistic people, I proposed to explore alternative methods that were more appropriate for this group, and might also lead to more sustainable employment. To perform this evaluation and to gain an in-depth understanding of the structures, attitudes and practical considerations at play, it was important to consult the key players: autistic job applicants, employers and professional stakeholders. In this way the findings and, more importantly, any recommendations arising from them, would have greater credibility.

The proposed research aimed to address a number of gaps in the literature, specifically the degree to which impression management, stereotyping and person-job/person-organisation fit informed the selection process and employment outcomes for autistic applicants. It sought to explore the perceptions and experiences of autistic adults regarding different job selection processes, and the observations and understanding of employers with varying approaches to assessing autistic candidates. In respect of impression management, it was decided that Goffman’s theory of ‘presentation of self’ (Goffman, 1959) should be examined from a new perspective by exploring both the expectations of the employer when interviewing autistic job applicants, and the degree to which autistic interviewees both understood and were able to conform to those expectations in order to deliver the required ‘performance’, given the clinical profile of autism. Specifically, Goffman assumes a ‘contract’ of behaviour in the various interactions between members of society, where different behaviour is expected depending on the social setting. These behaviours may assume a degree of artificiality and ‘performance’ but they are nevertheless sanctioned by society as the appropriate way to conduct oneself. In the case of autistic people, however, it was possible that the ‘contract’ may not be observable for several reasons. These may be an inability to understand the ‘rules’ due to lack of ‘Theory of Mind’ (see **2.3.1** above), or limitations in the capacity to ‘perform’ in a neurotypical way – for example, eye contact – even when there is an awareness of the social conventions. In addition, autistic people may be less likely to adopt a ‘persona’ and engage in self-promotion, compared with non-autistic applicants.

Stereotyping in relation to autism was also of interest, as increasingly the media presentation of autistic people has focused on ‘high-functioning’ and talented individuals with exceptional skills in areas such as technology. Alongside this (and perhaps as a consequence of it) contrasting attitudes towards the employment of autistic people were beginning to emerge whereby an ‘elite’ group with, for example, excellent software skills appeared valued and sought after by employers while those without such skills were much less likely to find employment. The concept of occupational bias has been variously explored from the perspective of race (King *et al.*, 2006), gender (Lipton *et al.*, 1991; Lyness and Heilman, 2006) and age (Stypińska and Nikander, 2018). In this study, however, I wanted to investigate the possible stereotyping of a particular group of people who perhaps uniquely attracted “positive” or “negative” discrimination according to their skills set.

Finally, I planned to explore the attitudes of employers and autistic job candidates in relation to person-job fit and person-organisation fit (Sekiguchi, 2004). To what extent did an autistic person’s skills, rather than their presentation, influence hiring decisions? In recent years, ‘positive’ recruitment of autistic people had been evident (Lipton *et al.*, 1991; Lyness and Heilman, 2006) in relation to information technology, engineering, coding or data processing where autistic people were viewed as ‘ideal’ candidates for certain positions, as the desired competencies were perceived to align with their particular skills and talents. As noted earlier, leading software firms such as Microsoft and Google have been gaining a reputation for targeting talented autistic software graduates to enhance their business (Kemp, 2018). Other employers in the field of software or finance such as SAP, EY and JPMorgan Chase have developed specific programmes to attract individuals whom they believe will demonstrate high levels of focus, technical ability and accuracy. Such occupational bias, however, could prejudice the opportunities for autistic applicants wishing to pursue a career in, for example, retail, education, hospitality or the creative arts, if employers have certain expectations of them rather than view them as individuals with different skills and talents. Similarly, what importance did autistic people place on the nature of the jobs for which they applied rather than the perceived values and culture of the organisation? Research had shown that public sector employees had more positive attitudes towards disabled people than private sector employees but within those sectors a variety of behaviours and management styles might be expected that impacted on opportunities for, and acceptance of, autistic candidates (Staniland, 2011).

## 4.4 Research Design

While a critical realist approach recognises the limitations of data collection, and the inherent biases of research, it nevertheless aspires to the ‘truth’ (Groff, 2000). I therefore considered that, while it may not be possible to establish an incontrovertible external reality, by triangulating the data gathering and accessing multiple sources, it might produce a more nuanced perspective to the research. In examining the influences that affect employment outcomes for autistic people, therefore, it was necessary to analyse the perceptions and attitudes of applicants, as well as employers and other key stakeholders, to understand certain influences that may determine the acceptance or rejection of an autistic job applicant at the selection stage.

This research sought to examine the influences of impression management, stereotyping and person-job/person-organisation fit on outcomes for autistic job applicants and consider whether alternatives to conventional assessments might be more appropriate. To explore this, I applied qualitative research techniques which are acknowledged as the most effective means of obtaining specific information about the values, opinions and behaviours of particular groups (Kvale, 1996). Specifically, I used in-depth interviews from which may be drawn patterns of behaviour or other common elements, focusing on individual cases to provide empirical accounts of the experiences of autistic job applicants.

The main focus of the research was autistic job applicants and current or potential employers of autistic people. A UK, rather than an international, perspective was adopted with a view to presenting practical recommendations for changes to recruitment processes. It was considered that a broader geographic study that would need to address significant differences in, for example, language (where semi-structured interviews would be restricted to English speakers), culture and legislation would result in a less cohesive study that would be of less practical application. On culture, for example, attitudes to autism vary greatly from country to country, and in some parts of the world, including France, autism may be viewed as a condition arising from emotional deprivation that is ‘treatable’ with psychoanalysis rather than as an inherited neurodevelopmental disorder (Chrisafis, 2018; Bishop and Swendsen, 2021). Similarly, in examining impression management, part of which is self-promotion, different modes of behaviour apply in some parts of the world: in the Japanese culture, for example, much more emphasis is placed on team effort than on personal achievement at job interviews, and frequent direct eye contact, which is the accepted norm in the UK, is likely to be viewed as disrespectful (Coget, 2014). A key element of the study also sought to examine how ‘reasonable adjustments’, as defined in UK legislation, impacted on recruitment outcomes for autistic people, whereas in many countries the right to ‘reasonable adjustments’ does not apply or may be interpreted differently. The incidence of autistic people in the workplace, and the research relating to it, is a relatively new phenomenon (Pellicano, Dinsmore and Charman, 2014). I therefore sought, additionally, to gain an understanding of the current landscape in which job applicants operated by seeking the views of other key stakeholders in relation to neurodiversity in the workplace. These included a trade union representative, job coaches and mentors of autistic job seekers and an international expert on autism. Key organisations that promote equality of opportunity for the autistic population such as the National Autistic Society (the leading charity for autistic people) and Autistica (the leading charity on autism research) also provided important contextual background to my research and assisted in securing access to research participants.

## 4.5 Ethics

The nature of the research, which included data relating to, and interviews with, vulnerable adults, raised a number of ethical issues. In considering my approach I had regard to the University of Sheffield’s Ethics Policy Governing Research Involving Human Participants, Personal Data and Tissue, of which the overriding policy is “*to protect the dignity, rights, safety and well-being of human participants”* (University of Sheffield, no date, p. 5). This laid down specific requirements for researchers to undertake that:

* *“participants should be fully informed about how and why their data will be collected and used as part of a research project, and by whom”*
* *“participants should have a right to consent to participate, withdraw from, or refuse to take part in the research”*
* *“personal information or identifiable data should not be disclosed without participants’ consent; data collected will be kept secure and anonymised where appropriate; and participants will not be exposed to unnecessary risk”.*

To comply with this, potential volunteers were sent a Participant Information Sheet addressing these issues (**Appendix 1**). In addition, the conduct of the research took account of the guidance drawn up by *Shaping Autism Research* (*Shaping Autism Research*, no date) and endorsed by the National Autistic Society to create an ‘enabling environment’ for autistic interviewees. These reflect the particular sensory needs and adjustments that some autistic participants may require to assist their participation in the research. They state that consideration should be given to:

* the physical environment in which interviews were to be conducted to avoid sensory distractions of light, noise and smell (including the avoidance of any perfumed toiletries worn by the interviewer). In the event, the onset of the pandemic in the spring of 2020 required a revision to the proposed method of face-to-face interviews. Instead, interviews were conducted online from November 2020 to June 2021, and participants were responsible for selecting their own environment;
* the avoidance of brightly coloured and patterned clothing and jewellery;
* allowance for participants to use calming mechanisms such as hand movements or moving around during the course of the interview (such as ‘rocking’) to help reduce levels of anxiety, known as ‘stimming’).

It was possible that for a number of participants the process would be both stressful and distressing as they reflected on their experiences of job interviews and possible past rejection. It was imperative therefore to conduct the research with sensitivity and in a manner that best accommodated the individual, and to anticipate possible withdrawal in some cases where participants felt emotionally unable to participate in, or complete, the interview. In such cases participants were to be offered the option of completing the interview in more than one sitting. In the event, the ‘incidents’ that presented themselves were more of a practical nature, for example online connections that were so poor in a couple of cases that it was necessary (with the agreement of the participant) to transfer to the telephone. Such occurrences tended to happen at the beginning of the interview, so it was less disruptive and did not take long to settle back into the discussion. One individual was content to hold the interview by Google Meet but did not wish the video recording to be retained. A number of participants displayed some emotion when recounting the failures and frustrations of finding work commensurate with their abilities or, indeed, in some cases any paid employment; and one young participant was emotional when she reflected on how onerous it was for her living in a society that was generally ignorant of the autistic condition. These individuals were able to recover quickly, however, and, rather than withdraw from the interview, tended to talk at greater length than most about their views and experiences.

## 4.6 Methods

The methods proposed at the design stage underwent a number of changes as a result of the restrictions imposed following the outbreak of Covid-19. The paragraphs below outline the original proposals, together with the changes necessitated by the practicalities of conducting research in a pandemic.

### 4.6.1 Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as they provide a logical sequence of questions to elicit focused answers on the area under examination. At the same time, they allow the flexibility to reorder questions or introduce additional ones in response to interviewees’ answers (Bryman and Bell, 2007). The effectiveness of semi-structured interviews is also evident from earlier studies involving autistic participants (Müller *et al.*, 2003; Hillier and Galizzi, 2014). Conversely, unstructured interviews are unlikely to elicit the information required as autistic people tend to struggle with the conversational nature of this approach. Similarly, an interview, rather than a questionnaire, was considered to be a better method for eliciting data for several reasons: the literature shows that autistic participants, who tend towards literal interpretation, might find written questionnaires confusing, despite the researcher’s rigorous efforts to avoid any ambiguity (Harris, 2017), secondly, the nature of the research was not on ‘how many’ but rather on ‘why’ and ‘how’, and the unexpected nature of some responses might require a follow-up question for clarity or additional data, which would not be possible when relying on questionnaires. The overriding objective was to allow all participants, and in particular those with autism, to proceed at their own pace, with time for clarification and reflection, where necessary. Such an approach, in my judgement, was conducive to eliciting more considered responses from interviewees regarding their attitudes and experiences.

### 4.6.2 Recruitment of autistic job applicants

Options for different sampling methods – particularly in respect of statistical sampling – depend to a large degree on the researcher’s access to data for the population as a whole. In the case of autistic job applicants and their employers, there are insufficient data on the population as a whole to support a sampling frame from which to select individuals. At the beginning of the fieldwork in 2020, there were no official statistics on employment among autistic people and it was not therefore possible to establish the population of autistic people from which a representative sample might be selected. I therefore opted for purposive sampling which, while not statistically representative, generated detailed, qualitative data on selected cases with similar features that may be indicative of wider application (Bryman and Bell, 2007). The original objective was to conduct face-to-face interviews with approximately 70 participants consisting of employers, autistic job applicants and a selection of organisations and individuals engaged in neurodiversity in the workplace.

From the outset I decided to pay a fee to autistic participants in order to compensate them for their time and in recognition of their contribution to the research. This was set by the University Ethics Panel at £15. The underlying reason for the decision was an awareness that a significant number of participants would be unemployed and may be in financial hardship, and that they should be rewarded for their involvement in the research. Another important consideration was the desire to assuage a sense of possible exploitation, given that participants were being asked to describe often sensitive and difficult experiences in their lives with no obvious benefit to themselves. As it transpired, one individual did raise the issue of possible exploitation by researchers. Having participated in a number of research projects, she said she believed she should be paid for her contribution, and appeared resentful that her participation in previous research projects appeared to have had no visible outcome:

*“We should get paid. I’ve done so much unpaid work teaching everyone about what it’s like to be autistic and I feel I’ve not been rewarded enough and sometimes people listen and (say) ‘Oh that’s very nice, very inspirational’. But will you see that applied in the real world? No, you won’t… without autistic people giving their input mostly for free... researchers would have nothing to write about and nothing to publish” (A28).*

I explained that in my own case the research had been undertaken with a view to effecting some change (however minor) and that I too felt that she should be rewarded for her input. In the main, however, people expressed their gratitude for being remunerated for their efforts; others appeared to be unaware that they were entitled to payment but welcomed the fee when it was offered, while a smaller group decided not to receive financial payment or donated it to a charity. It is possible that some (although not all) participants chose not to receive the fee for reasons of confidentiality since in order to access payment they were required to submit details of their name, address and bank account to the University Finance department.

In sourcing autistic participants with experience of job interviews, I consulted the National Autistic Society which had details of contacts in their 116 regional branches who might facilitate the recruitment of suitable volunteers. In most cases, this was achieved by branch secretaries emailing their members the Participant Information Sheet I had prepared (see **Appendix 1**) which specified the eligibility criteria. These stipulated a minimum age of 18, a formal diagnosis of autism and experience of a job interview, whether successful or unsuccessful. Where possible, a pilot exercise is advisable before embarking on interviews with the full list of participants (Bryman and Bell, 2007), as even the best researched and most considered questions may fail to yield the expected data or give rise to an important but as yet unexamined line of enquiry. I therefore proposed to review the initial interviews in order to adjust my approach or further develop the interview questions to gain maximum benefit from the fieldwork.

Two branches were contacted at first to test the level of response, and seven replies were received. This represented approximately 14% of my target participants, which I judged sufficient to test any potential flaws in the design, and augment or decrease the range of questions I had devised (Connelly, 2008). The first tranche of seven interviews provided assurance that participants were sufficiently at ease with the process to communicate their experiences and views. In addition, their contributions led me to broaden the range of questioning to include discussion of job descriptions and Situational Judgement Tests, which some had raised as critical barriers to their accessing the job market. In keeping with the National Autistic Society’s guidance on interviews with autistic people, the topic guide questions (**Appendix 5**) were sent to autistic participants in advance. The objective was to remove as far as possible any unexpected element that might induce anxiety in someone on the autism spectrum and also to allow participants an opportunity to prepare and reflect on their answers, if they so wished**.**In particular, I was keen that they should have time to think about any aspects of the proposed discussion that they considered important but had not been addressed in the topic guide questions. To emphasise this point, the covering email that accompanied the interview protocol stated that this was my assessment of some of the issues that influenced the outcomes for autistic job applicants but that their views on any additional aspects that had not been addressed would be welcome.

I continued to contact NAS regional branches, two or three at a time, having first researched their websites for the most appropriate groups, since some were dedicated more to families with young children, and were less active with adult groups. With the continuation of the pandemic, however, the number of respondents fell sharply as many branches needed to focus on supporting individuals through the strictures of lockdown. By this stage I had recruited 20 of the 50 participants I was seeking, and had no further volunteers in prospect. In keeping with my original plan, therefore, I approached Autistica, an autism research charity that has a database of autistic individuals interested in participating in research. This yielded an additional 32 volunteers (originally 34, but two dropped out), the great majority of whom were graduates or postgraduates, bringing the total sample size for autistic job applicants to 52. An analysis of participants across different criteria is given in **Tables 3 to 7** (see pages **75-77**) below, and a breakdown by individual is at **Appendix 8.**

It should be noted that co-morbidities are commonly found with autism. These may be of a physical nature, such as bowel disease or epilepsy, or psychological conditions such as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) and depression. Participants were not asked to specify any other conditions than autism when applying to participate in the research. However, a number of individuals informed me during the course of the interview that they had other diagnoses, including Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), dyspraxia, paranoid schizophrenia, hyperacusis (sensitive hearing), Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) and prosopagnosia (face blindness). It was not possible to assess the impact of these additional conditions on an individual’s performance but as one of the aims of the research was to evaluate the effect of autism on impression management at job interviews, participants who volunteered that they had co-morbidities were asked whether, in their opinion, the additional condition was more detrimental to their ability to ‘perform’ well than their autism. In three cases, where the participants had ADHD, dyspraxia and DID respectively, they believed that it was.

### 4.6.3 Recruitment of stakeholders and employers

The study aimed to provide as broad an insight as possible into the influences and challenges for autistic job applicants. Interviews were therefore sought additionally with stakeholders who had a professional interest in employment and autism, and employers, who ultimately determined the outcomes for autistic job seekers. I approached stakeholders first as I estimated that their feedback and knowledge would in turn help inform my selection of employers. This group consisted of nine individuals, most of whom were engaged directly or indirectly in enabling autistic people into employment, and three of whom identified personally as autistic. (**Appendix 9**). Those who had experience of day-to-day involvement included a job coach, labour market intermediary[[4]](#footnote-4), trade union representative and chairman of an organisation that introduced ‘high-functioning’ autistic applicants to UK and international companies. Two contributors were chosen from the field of education because of their links with companies that had offered work trials to their students, plus an autism historian and researcher who had recently published a practical guide on work opportunities for autistic people. Finally, I spoke to an international expert based in the United States who writes and lectures on all aspects of autism, including employment.

In respect of employers, the objective was to engage representatives from all sectors – public, private and third – and across a range of industries that included, where possible, all entry levels. I contacted employers in groups of four or five that comprised a variety of organisations and sectors, and depending on their responses, adjusted invitations to the next group to maintain the desired representation. Fourteen organisations were approached in all, of which five did not reply (despite follow-up requests), one declined (a charity that said they did not have the resources) and eight agreed to participate, one of whom identified personally as autistic. At this point I considered I had met my objective as the participating group consisted of: an investment bank, an insurance company, a high street retailer, a multinational brand, two public sector organisations, a non-departmental public body in the creative arts, and a small charity (**Appendix 9**).

### 4.6.4 Data collection

Each interview lasted between 40 minutes and two hours, with most extending to about one hour and a quarter. The topic guide questions for the three participant groups are at **Appendices 5-7.** In respect of autistic participants, they were framed in accordance with the National Autistic Society’s guidelines on interviewing autistic people (National Autistic Society, no date b). In general, autistic people respond best to clear, concise, direct questioning rather than to general, abstract, hypothetical questions such as, ‘Tell me about yourself’ or ‘What do you think about…?’ They may also interpret language literally. Unlike the more open form of questioning commonly used in qualitative research, therefore, the interview was structured in such a way as to put participants at their ease, beginning with short, precise, factual questions with Yes/No answers. This in turn led to broader, more exploratory questioning such as, ‘What effect did the (job) interview have on you?’ By pacing the interview, listening carefully to their responses and providing the necessary prompts, I aimed to encourage participants to relate their experiences and views in as relaxed a manner as possible.

In practice, most participants were articulate and fluent in their responses and moved quickly to ‘open’ conversation. A small minority were guided through a more literal process, and some asked for clarification where I had been unclear in my questioning, or where they wanted greater detail. Many had evidently prepared for the interview and some referred to notes they had made in relation to the topic guide questions. Interviewees were generally very forthcoming about their views and experiences and – possibly because questions had been sent to them in advance, or because a common autistic trait is to be focused on the task in hand – remained on topic for the majority of the time. The most common deviation for those who were, or had been, in employment was to introduce comments about their experiences at work rather than the job interview but they quickly reverted to topic when this was pointed out. In general, the questions were well understood, although some interviewees required further explanation on the precise meaning of terms such as auditory processing and situational judgement tests. In the case of the latter, although they were unfamiliar with the term, most had some experience or knew about this form of assessment.

The questions that I raised during the course of the interview inevitably set the parameters for the discussion. However, at the end of the interview each participant was asked if there was any aspect of the subject that had not been included which they thought should be raised (the question was also included in the topic guide questions sent in advance). Most did not add anything further, but some took the opportunity to comment more generally on the disadvantages to the autistic population and society as a whole of current recruitment methods.

In research of this nature, it is also relevant to reflect on the extent to which some participants were themselves exercising ‘impression management’ in their interactions with me, when giving an account of their job interview experiences. They would have been aware from my introductions and topic guide that I was not approaching the research from a state of ‘tabula rasa’ and there was a possibility that their views might have been influenced by what they perceived to be the ‘required’ or ‘favoured’ answer. Similarly, a few individuals with a diagnosis of ‘mild autism’ or ‘autistic traits’ delivered their accounts in a very entertaining way that might possibly be construed as a ‘performance’ to engage the interest of the interviewer. For example, one participant gave a very amusing account of an interview with a high-tech firm where a dog kept interrupting the proceedings. However, this was a small minority of participants, and it is not possible to make a judgement in such cases. In general, the strongest impression I gained from the interviews was consistent with the conduct often associated with people on the autism spectrum: a directness of manner, attention to detail and lack of self-consciousness.

The majority of participants expressed interest in the outcome of the research and asked to see the findings in due course. Some invited me to give a talk on the subject (mainly employers), enquired about suggested reading on the topic and asked for advice on specific matters. Wherever possible, I assisted with providing factual information but was mindful that my role was that of researcher and not of counsellor or physician (one young participant, for example, asked if I knew how she might arrange a brain scan).

Where interviews had been conducted by Google Meet, transcripts were automatically produced, although the accuracy of these varied depending on the quality of the recording. The most efficient way of correcting scripts was to review them as soon as possible after the interview when inaccuracies could be more quickly identified and corrected. In the case of the three telephone interviews, these were audio-recorded and transcribed subsequently. Transcripts of the interview were then coded in line with the topic guide questions by cutting and pasting the data under the respective themes. Additional topics such as job descriptions and situational judgement tests, which were not in the original topic guide questions but emerged as important, relevant topics at the pilot stage, were added for the ensuing interviews.

### 4.6.5 Template analysis

Template analysis – a form of thematic analysis – was used to develop an analytic template in order to categorise the collected data. Thematic analysis is commonly used in qualitative research (Cassell and Bishop, 2019), including with interview data (Kenny and Briner, 2010), for “*identifying, organising and interpreting themes in textual data*” (King and Brooks, 2018, 14, p 1). Its prevalence may be attributable in part to the generic nature of the approach which is not linked to a specific theoretical or philosophical belief (King and Brooks, 2018; Cassell and Bishop, 2019).

The essential process is first to define the emerging themes and then to organise the dataset within those themes (King and Brooks, 2018). Most of the elements of the initial template were contained in the original topic guide questions (**Appendices 5-7**) which sought to examine the influences of impression management, stereotyping and person-job/person-organisation fit on the selection of autistic job applicants. The first template covered a priori themes derived from the literature review that sought to identify the problems facing autistic people when attending job interviews, for example, eye contact, sensory issues and hypothetical questions. It also included themes relating to practical solutions for overcoming these barriers in the form of alternative assessments such as job-based tasks or work trials. These themes were entered into a spreadsheet and the data from the transcripts recorded under each theme by means of cutting and pasting. The coding of the initial seven transcripts which served as a ‘pilot’ led to a second iteration as it identified several areas of importance raised by participants that had not been included in the initial template, and additional thematic categories were therefore added. As coding of the remaining transcripts was done, categories were further sub-divided within the hierarchical structure as more data emerged.

The final version of the template is shown in **Table 4.**

**Table 4: The thematic template**

**1. Background of the participant**

1.1. Age

1.2. Age of diagnosis

1.3 Educational qualifications

1.4 Work experience (paid /voluntary work)

1.5 Gender

1.6 BAME

**2.** **Job descriptions**

2.1 Length

2.2 Clarity

2.3 Accuracy

2.4 Competencies

**3**. **Situational Judgement Tests**

3.1 Time restrictions

3.2 ‘Theory of Mind’

3.3 Elimination at first hurdle

**4. Artificial Intelligence**

4.1 Participants unaware

4.2 Based on neurotypical behaviour

4.2 No access to ‘reasonable adjustments’

**5. Disclosure**

5.1 Non-disclosure to avoid ‘discrimination’

5.2 Disclosure to request ‘reasonable adjustments’

5.3 Disclosure only to selective organisations

5.4 Disclosure only after offer of interview

5.5 Disclosure only after offer of job

**6. Reasonable adjustments**

6.1 Unaware of right to request ‘reasonable adjustments’

6.2 Unsure what to request

6.3 Not requested to avoid ‘creating bad impression’

6.4 Requested successfully

6.5 Requested but not granted or overlooked

6.6 Not possible in assessments using Artificial Intelligence

**7. Getting to the interview**

7.1 Poor instructions on how to get to venue

7.2 Not met on arrival

7.3 Anxiety

**8.** **Sensory overload at interview**

8.1 Lighting

8.2 Noise

8.3 Smells

8.4 Visual distractions

**9. Interview setting**

9.1 Formal

9.2 Informal

9.3 Stimming

**10. Non-verbal behaviours at interview (excluding eye contact)**

10.1 Handshaking

10.2 Anxiety

10.3 Masking

**11 Eye contact**

11.1 Awareness of need to maintain eye contact

11.2 Reasons for poor eye contact

11.3 Sustaining eye contact affected performance

11.4 Society’s assumptions about lack of eye contact

**12. Interview Questions**

12.1 Questions in advance

12.2 Hypothetical questions

12.3 Literal interpretation

12.4 The ‘icebreaker’

12.5 Auditory processing

12.6 Executive functioning

12.7 Anxiety

**13. Self-promotion**

13.1 Self-worth

13.2 ‘Non-autistic’ behaviour

**14. Stereotyping**

14.1 Assumptions made by employers

14.1.1 Learning disabled

14.1.2 Infallible

14.2 ‘Excuse’ not to engage with people/activities

**15. Person-job/Person-organisation fit**

15.1 Preference for job, organisation or both

15.2 Public or private sector

15.3 Culture

**16. Alternatives to conventional job interviews**

16.1 Task- based assessment

16.2 Work trial

16.3 Sustainable employment

**17. Long-term impact on job mobility**

17.1 ‘Trapped’ in job

17.2 Lack of promotion within organisation

The use of template analysis enabled an iterative and flexible approach that helped to develop both a broad overview of the research topic as well as a more detailed examination of specific codes within the hierarchical structure. Thus, responses to the initial themes identified in the topic guide were coded but other themes were added as they emerged from the transcript data. Examples of additional themes that were included were job descriptions, situational judgement tests and the long-term impact of interviews on job mobility (including progression within an organisation).

The last of these exemplifies how the templating approach brought a wider and unforeseen perspective in terms of participants’ experiences, and the resultant impact of the job selection process. When initially drawing up the topic guide questions, the primary focus had been on autistic applicants seeking to enter the job market. The emerging data, however, showed that there was an additional group affected by the selection process: those who felt ‘trapped’ in unsuitable employment as they could not countenance another job interview. Most of this group had struggled to gain employment in the first place, and had achieved it often through methods less reliant on the conventional interview, such as a period of voluntary work, task-based assessments or personal recommendation. Now in middle-age or older, and often over-qualified for their current position, they were ready to progress to other positions but viewed the job interview as an insurmountable obstacle to promotion or alternative employment. Consequently, a new category of ‘long-term impact on job mobility’ was added to the hierarchical structure.

Templating also facilitated the more detailed examination of certain behaviours as additional data were collected and compared from the transcripts. An example of this can be illustrated by reference to eye contact. Lack of eye contact is commonly cited as a ‘failing’ in autistic people in relation to ‘good’ impression management at interviews. The reasons for poor eye contact, however, are less well known, although it is sometimes viewed as a physical reaction. Respondents’ comments, however, showed a more complex and individual experience of this phenomenon.

In many cases participants were unable to explain why they had difficulty in maintaining eye contact or said they had never thought about it; or in some cases had not realised that they did not engage in eye contact until it was pointed out to them. In a few cases it was likened to staring at very bright or flickering lights, or ‘repelling magnets’ that exerted intense pressure on the eyes:

*“It feels as if their eyes have the same energy as my eyes, and if you try to connect two magnets that repel, you can feel like a kind of pressure in the air… I feel like my eyes are repelled by their eyes and it’s really uncomfortable. It has nothing to do with how they feel about me. It’s nothing to do with me being scared of them. It just doesn’t feel natural.” (A28)*

For others, however, it was seen as an intimate exchange – or possibly a form of sexual advance – that was inappropriate except for with certain friends and family. Several individuals also expressed the view that other people’s eyes could be intimidating and an unwanted connection that might reveal their inner thoughts to strangers, analogous to the ‘eyes are the window to the soul’. Another participant said that she found it impossible to ‘read’ what others were thinking from looking into their eyes and so was left confused and full of self-doubt.

This in turn led to some participants reflecting on why neurotypical society placed such importance on eye contact as an indicator of work ethic or morality; and how they sometimes found themselves overcompensating for their lack of ‘normal’ eye contact by staring at people they were engaged with. By adopting template analysis, therefore, it was possible within one code to elicit rich and varied data on this particular aspect of autistic behaviour.

The templating approach also highlighted links and patterns across certain themes. For example, research has previously found that autistic people often experience anxiety in their daily lives – although it is not strictly a clinical feature of autism – and an event such as a job interview would be likely to exacerbate such feelings. This was confirmed in the data, where the vast majority of participants reported high degrees of anxiety when preparing for, and attending, job interviews. In addition, my examination confirmed that many autistic people struggled with executive functioning. Through the process of coding, it was possible to see the link between the experience of anxiety and the impairment of executive functioning. This is of particular importance at the conventional job interview where cognitive flexibility is often needed to draw on examples of previous work experience when describing skills and competencies. The following extracts are typical examples from the dataset which help to illustrate this finding:

*“I think when I'm stressed and anxious, my executive processing can fall apart, so I can easily get lost on my way to places or get my timings wrong with transport or have trouble parking the car, drive into things so the whole experience in the run-up to the interview is extra challenging. So doing all those basic things like taking yourself to work becomes extremely difficult and exhausting.” (A20)*

*“I know certainly I have some social anxiety and… that can be very difficult in the interview setting. When I'm feeling particularly anxious about presenting in front of these people it can make my other autistic difficulties worse, particularly the issue of processing verbal information. And I… sometimes blank where I can't think of anything to say or I haven't actually processed the question properly and I'm not entirely sure what's being asked of me.” (A44)*

Thus, the templating approach revealed that the experience of anxiety was threaded through all stages of the interview process and that the link with executive functioning further impacted adversely on participants’ ‘impression management’ at job interviews.

A further example of the connections between themes that emerged from this approach was the relationship between ‘reasonable adjustments’ and selection methods that rely on artificial intelligence. As noted in the literature review (see **2.9** above), these methods use algorithms that are based on neurotypical behaviours and may compare the applicant’s results with those of the top-performing staff in a company to replicate the profile of an ‘ideal’ employee (Buranyi, 2018). Such devices that are engineered to give preferential treatment to the neurotypical population (and, more precisely, to certain subsets within that group) are likely to have an adverse effect on the outcome for autistic applicants whose profile of behaviour will fail to match the desired performance. As one participant, who had experience of algorithms in his field of work, said:

*“I think it is actually taking out the autistic people group all together because the algorithm never factors in disability.” (A27)*

The thematic approach, however, also highlighted the connection between the autistic job applicant's right to request ‘reasonable adjustments’ and the barriers presented by selection processes based on algorithms. Because of the ‘bespoke’ nature of the algorithms - which are not communicated to the applicant - it is not possible to know which adjustments would be appropriate, even if they were implemented. As one representative of an organisation that campaigns for employment for ‘high-functioning’ autistic candidates explained:

*“We do not know the reasonable adjustments to ask for with the AI job interview because we don't yet know really what's going on out there and it's not just one platform. This is hundreds of different iterations of it.” (S7)*

### 4.6.6 Analysis of the sample data

The background data were analysed across six broad categories: gender, education, age, age of diagnosis, BAME and employment. The criteria for participating in the research were: aged 18 or over, a formal diagnosis of autism and experience of a job interview. The sample does not seek to be representative of the autistic population as a whole, and indeed data on the population of unemployed autistic people are limited. However, the data in general indicated a variety of experiences, responses and ‘types’, although there are several points to note in the sample of participants.

**Table 5** shows a much higher representation of females in terms of the current estimated ratio of autistic males to females in the UK population, which is 3:1. In this sample, females outnumber males at approximately 1.4: 1 (58 females to 42 males). This may be explained by more females than males volunteering to participate in research projects of this kind. Also, the clinical diagnosis of women has been increasing in the last decade with a greater recognition of autism in females, although a diagnosis is less likely to occur at an early age due to females’ greater ability to ‘mask’ their condition (Bargiela *et al.* 2016). To explore this aspect, in addition to a breakdown of the age of diagnosis across the whole sample (**Table 7.2**), an analysis of age of diagnosis by gender was carried out to see if there was evidence of later diagnosis of females (**Table 7.3**). Although it is a small number of cases, and therefore caution is needed in interpreting the findings, in this sample 14% of males were diagnosed at aged 10 or under, but no female. By age 20, however, the profile is very similar with 14% male and 13% female having received a diagnosis. It is also noteworthy that 44% of all females did not receive a diagnosis until they were over 40, compared with 32% for males. The median age of diagnosis in the sample was, however, very similar with 36 years for males and 37 years for females.

Employment posed the greatest challenge in terms of presenting useful comparative data, given the lack of published data. However, in the research sample, employment rates, although low, were much higher than the ONS data (29% full-time and 27% part-time, compared with the ONS figure of 11% for both categories, see **Table 9.1**). This is most likely explained by the fact that the ONS sample will have been drawn from the full spectrum of autistic people, including those with such profound difficulties that they are effectively disabled from paid employment. My sample, by contrast, comprised individuals of average or above average educational attainment.

The ONS labour market statistics for graduates and postgraduates were also compared with the research sample. The most recent comparable ONS figures, published in June 2021, showed that the employment rates for working-age (aged 16-64) graduates and postgraduates were 86%, and 88% respectively (Office for National Statistics, 2021). By comparison, those in the research sample were 47% and 76% (**Table 9.2**). Differences in the numbers of autistic graduates and postgraduates in ‘highly-skilled’ employment compared with the UK averages were even more marked. In the sample of participants interviewed, only 27% of graduates and 40% of postgraduates were in work commensurate with their academic qualifications, compared with UK averages of 66% and 78% respectively (**Table 9.3**). This would indicate that differences in access to the labour market exist even at the highest educational levels, and that significant numbers of autistic graduates and postgraduates are either unemployed or overqualified for the position they hold. Examples of ‘overqualification’ among autistic employees interviewed were postgraduates in their 30s or 40s working as a data entry clerk, in an Amazon warehouse, customer service support or as a school dinner lady.

**Table 5: Gender of autistic participants**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|   | Male | Female | Total |
| No. | 22 | 30 | 52 |
| %  | 42 | 58 | 100 |

*\* No individual identified as non-binary*

**Table 6: Educational qualification**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|   | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | Total |
| No. | 1 | 4 | 10 | 17 | 20 | 52 |
| % | 2 | 8 | 19 | 33 | 38 | 100 |

 *Key:  0 - no qualifications*

*1 - ‘O’ level/GCSE/CSE*

*2 - ‘A’ level or equivalent*

*3 - Degree*

*4 - Postgraduate degree*

**Table 7.1: Age**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|   | 18 -20 | 21-30 | 31-40 | 41-50 | 51-60 | 61-70 | Total |
| No. | 1 | 14 | 10 | 16 | 9 | 2 | 52 |
| % | 2 | 27 | 19 | 31 | 17 | 4 | 100 |

**Table 7.2: Age of diagnosis 1**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|   | 0-10 | 11-20 | 21-30 | 31-40 | 41-50 | 51-60 | 61-70 | Total  |
| No. | 3 | 4 | 11 | 14 | 12 | 7 | 1 | 52 |
| % | 6 | 8 | 21 | 27 | 23 | 13 | 2 | 100 |

**Table 7.3: Age of diagnosis by gender *1***

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|   | 0-10 | 11-20 | 21-30 | 31-40 | 41-50 | 51-60 | 61-70 | Total  |
| Male (no.) | 3 | 0 | 6 | 6 | 4 | 2 | 1 | 22 |
| % | 14 | 0 | 27 | 27 | 18 | 9 | 5 | 100 |
| Female (no.) | 0 | 4 | 5 | 8 | 8 | 5 | 0 | 30 |
| % | 0 | 13 | 17 | 27 | 27 | 17 | 0 | 101\* |

*\*Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.*

**Table 8: Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic (BAME)\* participants**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|   | BAME | Non-BAME | Total |
| No. | 8 | 44 | 52 |
| % | 15 | 85 | 100 |

*\*In keeping with the government’s definition of “BAME”, this group includes “white other” i.e., white non-British individuals such as white Europeans. Five of the eight individuals cited fall into this category.*

**Table 9.1: Employment**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|   | Full-time | Part-time | Full-time Education | Unemployed\* | Total |
| No. | 15 | 14 | 4 | 19 | 52 |
| % | 29 | 27 | 8 | 37 | 101\*\* |

*\* Of these, six were engaged in some form of voluntary work.*

*\*\* Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.*

**Table 9.2: Percentage of autistic graduates and postgraduates in employment compared to UK averages *1***

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|   | Autistic | UK average |
| Graduate | 47% | 86% |
| Postgraduate | 76% | 88% |

*\*This table shows the percentage of graduates and postgraduates in the study who were employed, compared with the 2021 ONS statistics for all UK graduates and postgraduates in employment. Source: own data and Office for National Statistics (2021).*

**Table 9.3: Percentage of autistic graduates and postgraduates in highly-skilled employment compared to UK averages 1**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|   | Autistic employees | UK average |
| Graduate  | 27% | 66% |
| Postgraduate | 40% | 78% |

*\*This table shows the percentage of autistic graduates and postgraduates in the study who were in ‘highly-skilled’ employment (as defined by ONS), compared with the ONS averages for all UK graduates and undergraduates in that category. Source: own data and Office for National Statistics (2021).*

### 4.6.7 Changes in the conduct of interviews due to Covid-19

In the initial stages of the research design, I planned to conduct face-to-face interviews with participants at neutral locations. The onset of the pandemic, however, necessitated a change in approach so that all interviewing was done remotely. My previous interviewing experience had been face-to-face, and I was uncertain how successful an online format would be, both technically and in terms of interpreting the more subtle reactions that may be apparent when in close proximity to someone. I decided therefore to delay fieldwork until ‘normal service was resumed’, as at that time it was thought lockdown would be temporary and of short duration. It soon became apparent, however, that changes would be in place for the foreseeable future and, if fieldwork were to proceed, I would need to speak to participants online. All interviews were therefore conducted remotely, either via Google Meet or, in three cases where it was requested or necessitated, by telephone.

This revised approach brought a number of unforeseen advantages as I could speak to individuals from a much wider geographical area. Participants came forward from all regions of England including the north (Yorkshire, Durham, Manchester and Cumbria); the south (Surrey, Sussex, Kent and Hampshire); and the midlands (Birmingham, Worcestershire and Northamptonshire). In addition, Scotland and Wales were represented. There were also two international contributors: a leading authority on autism and a young college student, both based in the United States. In addition to a wider geographical reach, this method benefited many autistic participants who said that the online experience was better suited to them. They were able to sit in a more comfortable chair and environment than would perhaps have been possible at an alternative location, and dress very informally, if they chose. A number of interviewees were accompanied by their pets, openly used fidget toys or ‘worry beads’ and, in one case, smoked. Another participant wore a shower cap as she was in the process of dyeing her hair. Although these outward signs of a more relaxed encounter are not conclusive evidence of an autistic person’s disposition – and indeed the findings indicate that individuals may nevertheless be experiencing some anxiety despite observable behaviours – the familiarity and flexibility of their setting was in my view conducive to a less inhibited interview. Participants might be expected to be more at ease in their home environment which avoided sensory distractions and the need to travel, which itself is a source of anxiety for many. As the visual focus was also on the face, rather than the whole body, it provided a ‘shield’ for those who needed to fidget or move their limbs (‘stimming’); and in a few cases where some participants became distressed on recalling the experiences of past failure and rejection in the workplace, they were able to recover in private surroundings rather than in an unfamiliar setting. Finally, an important practical advantage for the researcher was the avoidance of many hours of unproductive travel time.

There were, however, some practical disadvantages in remote interviewing, including the quality of the internet connection, which was unpredictable. A line to the United States might be crystal clear, while 20 miles away the connection might be so poor that it was a struggle to decipher what was being said. The challenge in such cases was to ask the participant to repeat what they had said without breaking the flow of conversation and confidential engagement. There were about six such cases in all, and in a few – where individuals were content with the proposed method – it was possible to switch to a telephone interview. It is not possible to know, however, whether the interview might have taken a different direction if the meeting had been face-to-face.

### 4.6.8 Evaluation

As noted above, the criteria for participation in the research were a minimum age of 18 years, a formal diagnosis of autism, and experience of a job interview, whether successful or unsuccessful. The objective was to recruit sufficient numbers to reflect the wide spectrum of individuals with autism (albeit only those who were likely to be cognitively capable of paid employment) without exceeding the point of saturation, where no new data were emerging to inform the research.

Fifty-four autistic applicants came forward, although two did not proceed to interview: one made initial enquiries but was contactable only via a public PC and in the end did not complete the consent form (although they had the option of receiving it by post); the second arranged twice to meet online but failed to attend on both occasions. By this stage I had reached my target of 50 participants and decided against a third attempt.

The 52 remaining participants, when analysed according to gender, age, age of diagnosis, BAME, employment and educational achievement, appeared to indicate a degree of variety within these categories. It was not possible, however, to gauge how representative these individuals were of the population of autistic individuals who experience difficulty accessing the job market due to the barrier of the job interview. The lack of official data on the profile of individuals with autism precludes any objective means of targeting the sub sample most affected by unemployment. The sample was also inevitably self-selective in that some eligible individuals may not have had access to, or wished to participate in, the research. There was also a certain incongruity in inviting those who may find interviews challenging to participate in an interview, although the impact on them was mitigated by the fact that the research interview had no direct bearing on their employment prospects, and they had access to the questions in advance. As it transpired, a number of people said at the outset that they would find the process challenging but that they would nevertheless participate as they viewed it as an important subject to which they wanted to contribute.

Selectivity also occurs in any form of research reporting, including semi-structured interviews where a multiplicity of data is gathered from which the researcher must choose which elements to present as findings. For example, as the fieldwork progressed, it was evident that the great majority of participants were in favour of work trials as the preferred method of evaluating their job-fitness. However, a very small minority were strongly against the idea – some stating that they feared excessive monitoring. It was important therefore to reflect these views, not least because the autistic population cannot be regarded as a homogeneous group where ‘one size fits all’.

Another aspect of selectivity which applies to all participants in interview-based research but particularly to autistic people who often have communication problems, is which individuals to give voice to in the reporting of the findings. Wherever possible, I sought to use the words of autistic people to explain their challenges and mental state, quoting extensively from the interviews. An above average number of participants, including a significant group who were highly educated and articulate individuals, recounted their experiences lucidly and with insight. By contrast, some participants presented with classic autistic traits, replying with short or monosyllabic answers which were often undeveloped, despite encouragement. I was conscious, therefore, that those whose behaviour was the least ‘neurotypical’ – and therefore least likely to succeed at interview – were, on this occasion, also the least able to articulate their experiences, although their difficulties in relation to impression management were evident, in part, from their outward behaviour.

Finally, my objective at the outset of the research was to examine the influences of impression management, stereotyping and person-job/person-organisation fit on outcomes for autistic job applicants seeking to enter the job market. As the research progressed, however, I encountered a number of participants who were in employment but spoke of being ‘trapped’ in their jobs. These were individuals, usually in, or approaching, middle age who had succeeded in obtaining work, often indirectly or through different selection processes from those used currently. Some had found employment through personal recommendation, a period of voluntary work or had been successful in the type of Civil Service examinations that were used in the Twentieth Century. Now they were unable to move on to other posts or gain promotion because of the barrier of the job interview. Although they had experience and ability, they felt locked into the status quo because of their inability to cope with job interviews.

## 4.7 Summary

In summary, consideration of the methodology in this research led to a critical realist approach with an interpretivist epistemological perspective. Purposive sampling was used to select 69 participants consisting of autistic people who had attended job interviews, professional stakeholders with knowledge of autism in the workplace, and employers drawn from a variety of industries, representing the public, private and third sectors. Due attention was given to the ethics surrounding research involving a ‘vulnerable’ group, and the best approach to interviewing autistic participants. With regard to reflexivity, the researcher’s professional background and connections with the autistic community were explained. Although some changes to the planned methods were necessitated by the onset of Covid-19, they were mainly a move from face-to-face to online meetings, which enabled a greater geographical spread of participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants, and thematic analysis was employed to interpret the qualitative data. The data arising from these interviews are recorded in the ensuing chapters: **Chapter 5** relates the findings on ‘impression management,’ and **Chapter 6** on ‘stereotyping, person-job fit and person-organisation fit’.

# Chapter 5: Findings (I) Impression Management

## 5.1 Introduction

This is the first of two chapters on findings, and focuses on ‘impression management’. The impression that one conveys at a job interview is one of the major determinants of a successful application. Moreover, as described previously, the literature identifies certain modes of behaviour that are more likely to succeed. These relate to both verbal behaviour (fluency of speech, tone of voice and responsiveness to the interviewer) and to non-verbal behaviour (firm handshake, eye contact, good posture and positive facial expressions).

The clinical profile of autism, however, indicates that those on the spectrum will have one or more developmental traits that may inhibit their ability to adopt these required modes of behaviour. As well as innate difficulties, certain external influences such as the environment and sensory input may also impair the performance of an autistic job seeker. In this chapter, the main factors that may compromise an autistic person’s capacity to conform to behavioural norms, and thus create a ‘good impression’, are examined. Fifty-two autistic adults were asked to relate their experiences of conventional job interviews and, from the data collected, seven main themes were identified that impacted on their ability to make a favourable impression on potential employers:

(i) Disclosure of autism

(ii) Reasonable adjustments

(iii) Sensory processing and the environment

(iv) Non-verbal behaviour

(v) Responding to interview questions

(vi) Self-promotion

(vii) Anxiety

When relating participants’ responses, the 69 contributors to the research are coded numerically as follows: autistic participants (A1-52), employers (E1-8) and stakeholders (S1-9).One employer and three stakeholders also identified as autistic.

## 5.2 Disclosure of autism

Prior to attending an interview, people on the autism spectrum must decide whether or not to ‘disclose’ or ‘declare’ their condition on the job application form. In Great Britain, it is illegal for employers to treat applicants differently because of their disability and, where an applicant does disclose, employers are obligated to support the autistic candidate and offer ‘reasonable adjustments’ at interview. For most of the autistic people interviewed, however, the decision to reveal their condition was considered in the context of whether this information would create a ‘bad impression’ at the outset, and thus affect their chances of selection for interview. Table 10 below lists the numbers of applicants in the sample who disclosed their autism to potential employers, and at which stage of the process.

**Table 10 Disclosure of autism to prospective employer**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Stage at which applicant disclosed** | **Number of participants** | **Percentage** |
| On application\*  | 17 | 33 |
| On notification of/ at the job interview | 3 | 6 |
| Once a job offer had been made  | 3 | 6 |
| Disclosure would depend on the organisation\*\* | 6  | 11 |
| Had not disclosed and unsure whether to in future\*\*\*  | 10 | 19 |
| Had not/would not disclose\*\*\*\*  | 13 | 25 |
| **Total** | **52** | **100** |

\*This group included three people who had been diagnosed while in their current employment and said they would disclose on future applications.

\*\* This group said they might disclose if an organisation expressed positive views on diversity and inclusion in their recruitment literature.

\*\*\* This group included participants with a recent diagnosis

\*\*\*\* This group included two people who believed their job prospects had been negatively impacted following disclosure in the past and would not therefore disclose in future.

### 5.2.1 Most people did not declare their autism on the job application form for fear of rejection

Approximately one third of participants disclosed their autism at the application stage (Table 10). The majority of participants believed that the disclosure of their autism at the job application stage would or could create a poor impression and prejudice their chances of being selected for interview. They considered that a lack of understanding of the condition, outright discrimination or preconceived ideas of how autistic people might behave would lead employers to the ‘safer’ option of selecting a neurotypical candidate:

*“I have a fear of being rejected immediately if they knew.” (A26)*

*“I wouldn't put it on my application form, never have; don't want to be discriminated against. (They’ll think) ‘Ah, here comes a weirdo.’” (A13)*

*“In an ideal world I’d like to (declare) but it’s just being realistic. Not that I didn’t want to… it’s just being afraid of people looking at that and then just disregarding you. They might already have an idea of what (autism) is and how that sort of person would come across and… would just reject you outright based on that alone.” (A9)*

***“****If I already had a job… I might have disclosed it if I was looking just for career progression rather than ‘If I don't get this job in two months, I could be out on the street’...” (A34)*

Two participants argued specifically that where employers had a greater choice of candidate – due perhaps to higher levels of supply in the labour market – they would favour a non-autistic applicant:

*“In the middle of a pandemic where they've got 100%, 200% more people applying for the same job and you've got perfectly good enough people, they're more likely to take... I mean some employers would be more likely to take the person without the autism.” (A10)*

*“I think people would be frightened because it's obviously some form of disability. So, if you've got a lot of applicants, why would you want to employ somebody who's going almost by definition to be ‘hard work, trouble’?” (A32)*

In the case of A36, her first experience of disclosing to an employer left her feeling ‘ashamed’ of her condition and influenced future decisions not to disclose:

*“I said… I might sometimes get overwhelmed and need to just step away for five or ten minutes to calm down. Is there somewhere that I can go, just while I take a few deep breaths, decompress and gather myself? And they gave me the key to the toilet. So, I thought, they say they ‘get it’ but how is giving someone the key to the staff toilet in any way appropriate? That made me feel like I might as well be in the toilet.’” (A36)*

Others related similar experiences where the reaction that they had received in the past had led to non-disclosure subsequently:

*“I disclosed at work when I got the diagnosis and that didn't go very well. So, I'm quite wary of disclosing until I know people.” (A47)*

***“****I'm not doing it anymore. I'm starting to feel like I'm not sure what I gained from it anymore… I'm just not confident about how it's perceived by other people and it could be that I'm completely wrong, and it is a good idea to disclose, and I’m being distrustful, but I've had interviews now where I just don't know. I'm not sure… I'm worried that I've been looked at differently... (and) if I don't get the job, it's on my mind: is it because of the autism or not?” (A42)*

Occasionally the decision not to disclose resulted from accounts of others’ experiences:

*“I've heard plenty of horror stories from others in the (autistic) community talking about how once they told their bosses they were autistic... a lot of them lost their jobs that way.” (A48)*

Ten out of 52 of participants were unsure whether or not to disclose in the future. A44, for instance, struggled with the decision, suspecting it might have adversely affected their job chances at the application and interview stage:

*“I'm actually in two minds about it… I mean, it's hard to tell but it may have given (employers) a negative impression of me... so even if it wasn't the only reason maybe it was in their mind. Or... maybe they were more aware when I was struggling, which, if I hadn't told them in advance... they wouldn't have noticed it to the same extent... certainly, I worry that they might have preconceptions (and)... it might be a reason why I was struggling to get interviews or to get through the interview process.” (A44)*

A52, a graduate, was unsure what action to take regarding disclosure, having been given conflicting professional advice:

*“One of the reasons I struggle with knowing whether or not to disclose is [that] I was advised by the University autism specialist careers advisor to disclose at every interview. I've since had some different advice from Access to Work (a DWP scheme), never to disclose at interview. And I don't know what the best thing to do is.” (A52)*

One woman, an arts graduate who had received a diagnosis in her late thirties, was struggling with whether or not to disclose in the future:

*“I'm not really sure how I would go about that (disclosing). Would I want to? Is this going to be seen as a disadvantage for me? Will I be dismissed if I mention I am on the spectrum? Or should I not say anything, or when should I say so? Yeah. That's kind of causing me quite a bit of anxiety.” (A16)*

The belief that disclosure might impact negatively on her job opportunities was informed by the reaction from people she knew in her personal life when she told them of her diagnosis. By failing to disclose, however, she believed that her mental health might be affected in the long-term:

*“I noticed that since I was diagnosed and I tried to tell people I know… I got a reaction that I didn't expect, and these are the people that I know. So, I think that if employers were told that, they might have their own**stereotypes and might prefer not to engage with somebody on the spectrum. Because I've gone through life and I've achieved something, people just dismissed it… and I tried to educate… people that I know but most… have just sort of disappeared shortly after I've told them so, yes, in terms of jobs, it makes me question should I say anything or should I continue pretending like I have, you know, like masking? Which obviously is not good for me because it ends up with me being very ill.” (A16)*

A16’s experience raises the issue of social capital in relation to autistic people. The term is broadly understood to refer to the social connections between people that enable productive outcomes (Szreter 2000). As with the neurotypical population, it can enhance the employability and general well-being of autistic job seekers but building social capital may be challenging for autistic people due to their difficulties in initiating and sustaining social interactions. Social capital may offer support, encouragement and feedback in many cases but for A16 it appears that, informing others of her clinical diagnosis, triggered the loss of her previous support group and left her in a more vulnerable state, questioning her decision to disclose to her inner circle as well as to potential employers.

A14 and A38 expressed similar views:

*“In the long run it probably would be best that I disclose my condition right away… in my application, even if they're less inclined to accept you.” (A14)*

*“I think... there's not much point in applying for something and getting it, then having problems, and then saying I've got a problem with this and, by the way, I think it's because I'm diagnosed autistic... because, in all fairness, if I was a manager, I’d try and help somebody, but I would be saying it really would have helped if you had just said at the outset.” (A38)*

A43 and A30, while recognising that disclosure might hinder their chances of selection, opted to declare their autism because they did not wish to work for an organisation that did not appear to welcome people with the condition:

*“I've always been of the opinion that I am who I am, and if you don't like who I am. and you don't like something about me then that’s your problem. And I think that’s the only way to change attitudes towards people is to embrace those things that people might see as negative.” (A43)*

*“Like it or not, it’s part of who I am, part of my identity. It’s the same as saying I’m a wheelchair-user or hearing-impaired.” (A30)*

One participant felt that disclosure of the condition might lead to better understanding of her as an individual:

*“If I do think different to them at least there's a reason for them to actually understand why I might be a bit different, or why I might not be giving them complete eye contact the whole time, or why I might be fidgeting a little bit or seem a bit more anxious…” (A23)*

Concern that a declaration of autism on the job application form might create a negative impression (and thus reduce their chances of an interview) was also shared by professionals in the field of autism. S4, a job mentor and coach, commented that due to legal requirements, employers were unlikely to state overtly that they were opposed to interviewing or appointing autistic candidates. It was not possible, therefore to quantify the extent to which those who disclosed were rejected at the application stage:

*“We will never know because… nobody's going to say, ‘Well, we're not interviewing this person… or they're not offering the job because they've disclosed their autism’. They're never going to say that because legally they can't, so we don't know.” (S4).*

However, S5, a labour market intermediary with some 20 years’ experience of mentoring autistic job seekers, was convinced that disclosure did impact on an autistic person’s chances of an interview:

*“We recommend that people don't disclose at the application stage because our experience is that you will be offered fewer interviews” (S5).*

This view aligned with one autistic participant’s observation:

*“The interesting thing is the times that I have not (disclosed), I've got an interview; the times I have disclosed, I have not.” (A24)*

### 5.2.2 Some applicants based their decision to disclose on the perceived culture of the organisation

In 8/52 of cases (Table 10), the decision whether or not to declare their condition at the application stage depended on the job seeker’s perception of the culture of the organisation to which they were applying:

*“I find when I'm applying it depends on the organisation, and I probably make pre-judgements to be honest, so the mental health charity, I disclosed; universities I tend to disclose… I look on their website and find out about them and I make the choice.” (A19)*

*“I tend to look for the NHS because I feel that there might be better boundaries in terms of work-life balance, but also a system to raise grievances… (with) the clearest structures in place and documents, and guidelines, and case law as well, if it came to it.” (A25)*

In particular, some were influenced by ‘inclusion statements’ in the job advertisement that signalled a positive attitude to disability or neurodiversity:

*“If a job advert came up… that had the pretty standard diversity and inclusion type statements but also said, ‘We value different ways of thinking’ or different types of thinking, words to that effect, I would have felt welcome disclosing.” (A2)*

*“If it says you get a guaranteed interview then I'll declare it.” (A21)*

*“I used to (declare) when applying for jobs at (an autism charity) … because you can just easily tell your diagnosis to them… In a normal job interview I sort of worry about talking about my diagnosis later on if I ever get that job… I think it may be safer that way.”**(A41)*

In one case, the participant had studied for his degree as a mature student, and was now applying for graduate-level jobs in a specialist area. Having previously concealed his autism in applications for more ‘menial’ jobs, he thought there might be greater understanding and acceptance from ‘well-qualified’ people who shared his specialist interest:

*“I don’t know, I might do it for this… job because I’ll be dealing with people with a PhD or Master’s who will hopefully be a bit more open-minded.” (A13)*

Several participants nevertheless commented that there were limitations to how well you could judge the culture of an organisation from the outside:

*“The organisational culture that the executives talk about might be phenomenal and the leaders might be great, and most of the people on the shop floor might be great. But there might still be quite a bit of prejudice.” (A34)*

*“I don't necessarily think… (the sector) has a huge impact in terms of autism because it just depends on the team and the individuals.” (A52)*

This last statement was supported by S5, a labour market intermediary who had many years’ experience of working with autistic job applicants:

*“You can have firms working in the same sectors who have very, very different attitudes. The biggest difference, and this is completely independent of the nature of the work or the sector, is if there's an open culture where the response to, ‘Can we do this?’ is ‘Yes, why not? Let's try it.’ It's really refreshing going to that workplace. If you go into one where there's a much more closed, defensive culture which a lot of HR departments do tend to, there is a sense of, ‘Why should we do that? If we do it for him, they'll all want that adjustment, they'll all want to wear headphones in the workplace.’” (A5)*

Finally, A52 took a pragmatic approach and, given the limited opportunities available to him, decided to take what was available, despite his reservations:

*“Beggars can't be choosers and so... I've gone for an organisation... that I didn't think had a great response to my autism and... I didn't feel particularly connected with. But in reality, I've not been very successful in interviews, so I feel like I've not got a choice and that I'm just taking whatever comes.” (A52)*

### 5.2.3 In most cases disclosure was made only after an offer of interview or not at all

In 29/52 of cases (Table 10), participants said either that they had not disclosed or would do so only after an offer of an interview or job had been made *“because if I disclose before the interview, I tend to expect that they won't offer me an interview” (A18).* Applicants who waited until during the interview itself to disclose their condition tended to be individuals who appeared more articulate, with good presentational skills. A52, for example, preferred to disclose at the very end of the interview process:

*“The way that I like to convey it is at the end. They ask, ‘Are there any questions?’ and I say, ‘Yes, I'm on the autism spectrum. Can you tell me a little bit about how that would fit in with your workplace and what sort of support might be available?’ And so, I kind of throw it back to them.” (A52)*

Similarly, A10 said he needed to make ‘a good impression’ first at the interview before revealing his diagnosis; and when he was not offered a post on one occasion, attributed it to the fact that he had informed the panel of the diagnosis:

*“I’m quite good at not disclosing until after the interview stage. So, by then they’ve formed a good impression of who I am. You know, I talk quite well so I don't really disclose it until the end. I feel like I shouldn't have to. I should be able to say I’ve got this autism as such at the beginning and for them to help make the changes to the kind of interview process, but I don't because in the past I have experienced, you know, ‘Oh, well, that's probably a learning disability’ etc. They've not said that but they've said, ‘Look, we don't think you would be the right fit for our role’ as soon as you declare that information. Everything was fine until you declared just that so, you know, it's based upon that.” (A10)*

A18 also believed her disclosure at interview had led to her not getting the job:

*“At one interview I told the lady that I have Asperger’s and she just said ‘All right, okay’ but I think it probably went against me. She decided not to give me the job. She didn't explain why but the fact that she just seemed to dismiss it gave me the impression that she decided she'd rather look for someone else. I asked for feedback but didn’t get any.” (A18)*

For 3/52 of participants the risk was seen as so great that they would not disclose until they had been offered the post:

*“My philosophy at the moment is I disclose as little as possible at the beginning until I've got the job, until that contract is signed and I've passed my probation period and it's all in concrete.” (A6)*

*“I think once you're in, they've kind of got to break the law if they're not going to support you or at least attempt to look like they're trying to.” (A26)*

For A50, however, the decision not to disclose before a job offer raised concerns about the possible interpretation employers might place on such an action, fearing accusations of manipulation or lack of trust:

*“Because then it starts with a mistrust. You don't say it, you say it when you start the job, and (they say), why didn't you say that before? So, it already puts something between you and your employer really. So, it is very tricky what to do. I think my first instinct would be to say straight away.” (A50)*

Similarly, A18 did not want to disclose before her interview for fear of rejection but felt obliged to declare at the interview, in case some issues should arise after her appointment:

*“I think what I prefer to do is to disclose at the interview… I feel more comfortable doing that because if they did employ me, and any issues came up, I could say, ‘Well, I did tell you this at the interview.’ I mean it has been suggested to me that I don't disclose at all until after I've been offered the job and I said, ‘Well, what happens if there's an issue that's connected with my Asperger's?’ And I was told, ‘It’s too late then, they've given you the job.’ And I don't feel comfortable with that attitude.” (A18)*

Although A6 was clear that he would not risk disclosure until he had received a firm offer from an employer, he nevertheless felt he might be viewed as “*manipulative”* or *“deceptive”* should he disclose later, with possible repercussions. He explained his dilemma:

*“The one question I keep on seeing on job applications nowadays is, do you consider yourself disabled? If you tick yes, you're setting yourself up for prejudice and ignorance and the whole world of misunderstanding. If you tick no, then you're lying and they could possibly use that against you. But even if you prefer not to say, that is still essentially saying yes. And I find that quite a difficult question to navigate at the application stage simply because with the best will in the world most neurotypical people do have preconceived ideas. I am actually convinced that when you say autistic, they hear the word ‘retard’ or ‘Rain Man’. When you go to a job interview, if you tell them you’re autistic, you're damned if you do, and damned if you don’t. There’s no way around that at the moment…The downside (to not disclosing before a job offer) is you’re seen as deceptive and manipulative.” (A6)*

It may be seen from the above cases that social capital can provide autistic job seekers with information, advice, and support that can help them make an informed decision about disclosing their autism, when to disclose it, and what to expect from the employer’s response. However, as is evident from the above, it can also pose some risks and challenges. For example, disclosing one’s autism to the wrong person, or at the wrong time, may lead to stigma, discrimination, or exclusion. This would suggest that autistic job seekers need to weigh the potential benefits and drawbacks of disclosing their autism, seek advice and support from diverse sources, and ultimately make a decision that aligns with their own values, goals, and preferences.

## 5.3 Reasonable adjustments

Under the Equality Act 2010, disabled people may request ‘reasonable adjustments’ to the recruitment process, including interviews, to compensate for any disadvantages they may experience due to their impairment (Equality Act, 2010). Disability in this case is defined as a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term negative effect on one’s ability to do normal daily activities. Requests for adjustments may be made in relation to physical barriers, such as wheelchair access or specialist equipment for the hard of hearing, but autistic people may also request adjustments that accommodate their needs. Although there is no prescriptive list - and employers may refuse a request - adjustments that might apply to those on the autism spectrum include receiving interview questions in advance, details of the interview panel or additional time to process questions. The majority of participants (36/52) did not request reasonable adjustments, in most cases because they had not disclosed their autism on their application form. In all, just under one third (16/52) requested some form of adjustment. Table 11 below summarises the findings in this area.

**Table 11 Requests for Reasonable Adjustments**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Category | Number of participants | Percentage |
| Did not request reasonable adjustments because had not disclosed autism before interview | 29 | 56 |
| Did not request reasonable adjustments although had disclosed autism before interview  | 7 | 13 |
| Disclosed autism before interview and requested reasonable adjustments | 16 | 31 |
| Total | 52 | 100 |

### 5.3.1 Some participants were unaware of, or had a poor understanding of, ‘reasonable adjustments’

Of the 36 who did not request adjustments, 7 participants, including those who had only recently been diagnosed with autism, were unaware of, or had a poor understanding of ‘reasonable adjustments’:

*“I've never really known what I can ask for, to be fair. Like I don't really know what ‘reasonable adjustments’ are because I don't really know… what to expect.” (A23)*

*“I mean I wouldn't have even thought about that… I have no clue.” (A26)*

*“I just went along with what I thought they wanted, you know?” (A40)*

A47, who had recently been diagnosed, commented:

*“I'm still at the early stages of coming to terms with the whole diagnosis so it feels quite uncomfortable trying to ask for adjustments. I can't think of what might help that makes any sense.” (A47)*

A37, an engineer in her twenties, highlighted the problem for autistic graduates entering the job market, as they were now being judged, possibly for the first time, on skills other than academic ability, for which they might need ‘reasonable adjustments’:

*“…another specific problem for people coming out of university going into their first job is that they might not (ask for adjustments). When I first started job hunting, I didn't ask for any adjustments because they hadn't been the same sort of problem at university, because academic work is marked purely on the basis of how academically strong it is. And the whole concept of the personal skills and the situational judgement test is just not something people are ever assessed on until they leave university.” (A37)*

S4, a job coach, confirmed that there was a lack of awareness among many of her clients:

*“There's an awful lot that can be done to improve the interview experience for people on the autism spectrum… and a lot of my clients will say, ‘Oh, I didn't know I could ask for that’, and they often don't know what will help.” (S4)*

A37 also pointed out the lack of opportunity to register her need for ‘reasonable adjustments’:

*“…there was no way of saying on the application form that I would need adjustments in the early stages of the application process.” (A37).*

A43 is an example of someone who was aware of, and felt she might benefit from, reasonable adjustments, but had difficulty defining her needs:

*“It's really difficult when you don't understand what you struggle with... and what's different, and then what might help that… I didn't know what to ask for when people said, ‘What help do you need?’, even if you know you are entitled to them… and there isn't always a lot of resources online that say these are the kind of reasonable adjustments you might want to ask for. It's not usually that clear to people.” (A43)*

In one case, A25, who was employed on a temporary contract and wanted to apply for a permanent position, felt confident about requesting ‘reasonable adjustments’ because she was able to access internal guidance on job interviews at the same establishment:

*“Because I was working in the same building, I had access to the internet and the HR forms and the ‘reasonable adjustments’ that managers and interviewers were meant to make. … so I knew... the (type of) ‘reasonable adjustments’ that (the employer) already agreed were reasonable...but not everyone would be aware of it, even though we worked in a learning disability and autism service…” (A25)*

### 5.3.2 Some participants chose not to ask for ‘reasonable adjustments’ for fear of creating a ‘bad impression’

Professionals supporting autistic job applicants said they would advise them to declare their autism, once they had an offer of an interview, in order to access ‘reasonable adjustments’:

*“We always recommend that once they're offered an interview, that they declare their diagnosis because (of)… reasonable adjustments.” (S5)*

The dilemma for many autistic people, however, is that in order to request ‘reasonable adjustments’ they need first to disclose their autism which, as seen in **5.2** above, was viewed by many as creating a negative ‘first impression’ in terms of their job application. One participant explained his reasons for not disclosing or requesting ‘reasonable adjustments’, while recognising this denied employers an opportunity to accommodate his needs:

*“I'm sure quite a lot of people have said this but I don't want to put any more spanners in the works. And obviously I realise it's unfair to say the companies aren't doing anything if you're not actually asking them to, but I have done in the past and it's kind of been frowned upon.” (A10)*

Three other participants stated a similar view:

*“I don't want to irritate them because I want a job. So, you don't want to upset the people you're trying to get a job from, it just doesn't make sense to me at all.” (A51)*

*“I think there's a very good chance that I wouldn't get the job if I disclosed something and asked for ‘reasonable adjustments’ up front. I think that would be a red flag.” (A26)*

*“Doesn't that (requesting ‘reasonable adjustments’) imply that the employer is expecting in future that this recruit… is going to be awkward? He’s not going to be at all flexible, is he? You know, he's got to have the interview room exactly as he wants it, and I would have thought that is not going to attract many employers.” (A32)*

In the case of A51, the decision not to ask had been influenced by advice from others:

*“A guy in our (autism support group) … was doing some voluntary work in a jobcentre club they were running for autistic people and he actually said to them, ‘I wouldn't ask for any ‘reasonable adjustments’ before the interview if I were you because that would be a good excuse for them not to take you on.’ So that’s the way it's viewed… there’s nothing like panicking an employer who's going to think, ‘Oh God, we're going to have to make so many adjustments.’” (A51)*

### 5.3.3 Participants asked for a variety of ‘reasonable adjustments’

The minority who did ask for ‘reasonable adjustments’, however, stressed their importance in enabling them to cope better with the interview process:

*“I will ask for that adjustment to be made in order that I can actually have a reasonable attempt rather than a cockeyed attempt that will automatically disqualify me because practice has shown it doesn't matter how many times I do interviews, unless I have some sort of allowances made, I'm not going to get anywhere.” (A29)*

The nature of the requests varied, including more details about the interview process, receiving questions in advance, a quiet area to sit in before the interview, and extra time to process and respond to interview questions. A12, a graduate, was in the practice of sending an email outlining those aspects of his autism that he thought were relevant to the interview and his future employment:

*“Before my interview, I want you to know that I have Asperger's Syndrome. For me, this means that I take a little longer than others to process verbal information. I find some social conversations awkward. I work most effectively if I have a clear routine and precise instructions. It is helpful if I know whom to go to if I have any questions or problems, but nevertheless I am determined to make the most of the strengths my Asperger’s gives me and I work hard to overcome the challenges. I will be grateful if this could be taken into account during this selection process.” (A12)*

S4, a job coach, explained how information about the interviewer(s) in advance of the meeting could be beneficial:

*“If they (autistic applicants) have a lack of social imagination, actually walking into a room, or virtually these days, and being presented with two or three faces of people they've never met before, that's just overwhelming. So, I always encourage people to find out who's interviewing them, look them up on LinkedIn, go into the company website. You've seen their photograph, you know what their job role is, whatever. So, when it’s that moment, it's someone who seems quite familiar. And that can be different.” (S4)*

A9 recounted how the familiarisation with the office helped him settle into his two-week unpaid work experience, which in turn led to full-time employment. A mentor from an autism support group, who worked at the company, offered to give him a tour of the premises:

*“I guess the fact that I was able to visit the premises beforehand is in itself a sort of an adjustment. She (the mentor) just encouraged me to come to the workplace and showed me around on a Saturday, when it would have been very quiet in the office.” (A9)*

Of the 16 participants who requested adjustments, 14 asked for questions to be provided in advance, or for more time to process them:

*“I usually explain I might need extra processing time, or for questions to be more clear and direct. And sometimes if they can give me an idea of the questions... and avoid more of the kind of... open, vague questions of, ‘Where do you want to be in five years?’” (A43)*

A16 said it helped her to have the questions printed out in front of her on the table *“so if I'm struggling with the light and noise to have it… in front of me so I can read it and then respond to it” (A16).* A17 had a positive experience when requesting questions in advance, following the advice of an employment mentor:

*“I was pretty uncomfortable with the interviews that I did before I got my ‘reasonable adjustments’. I was going in there without any idea of what the questions were. I was put on the spot, usually giving answers that just didn't really present my skills and knowledge, and I let myself down.” (A17)*

A25 also requested that the questions should be in written form but in addition that he be given certain prompts, if needed:

*“I asked if the questions could be provided in a written form... so that I could look at it to remember. Once I start talking, I sometimes forget what the end part is... so they did that, and also if they would say if (I’d) answered it quite right, or missed a point. And if they wanted more information, can they say specifically which part I needed to expand on rather than, ‘Is there anything else you'd like to add?’ Because it's not clear whether that's just politeness, or if I am missing something and not picking up on it.” (A25)*

For A42 it was important also to know the structure of the interview:

*“I've asked for a bit more information about the structure that the interview is going to take. So, how many questions there will be within a specified time and what kind of format it will be as well. And I found that's quite helpful.” (A42)*

A42 also expressed her difficulty with judging the length and direction of her answers, and with the rigid structure of interviews that, in her view, failed to draw out her knowledge and potential:

*“I find the whole process a bit confusing… in terms of knowing if I've said enough or not. And I really wish they could be much more blatant about that (and say) you've reached the ‘good’ tick box here on our interview checklist. Can you say anything else that could turn it into an ‘excellent’? Because if I’ve almost said a really good answer, but not quite, I wish they would tell me that because it could be that there is something I could say that has just escaped my mind.” (A42)*

### 5.3.4 Some requests for ‘reasonable adjustments’ were refused or overlooked

Sometimes requests for ‘reasonable adjustments’ were refused by employers, or were overlooked on the day. In one case, the candidate asked if she might give a presentation as part of her assessment, and was told to prepare a five-minute talk on a given subject. At the interview, however, she was told (at the end) that it had been replaced by an additional question:

*“You sit there and you think, you really don't understand why I asked for ‘reasonable adjustments’. If I have difficulty processing information that's being thrown at me, the last thing I need is for something to be put in place and then swiped.” (A29)*

A44, an Oxbridge graduate, was told in advance that his request had been declined:

*“The reason I brought it up (autism) was because I wanted to see if I could have... the interview questions in advance... because I do have a problem sometimes blanking – either not being able to think what I want to say or not processing the question properly – but generally I was told that they didn't want to do that because they felt it would give me an advantage over the other candidates.” (A44)*

It is interesting that the employer viewed the provision of questions in advance as an advantage to the candidate rather than – as ‘reasonable adjustments’ are intended – to compensate disabled people for the disadvantages they have, in this case problems with executive functioning and auditory processing.

A47 had a similar experience:

*“My wish has always been that you should be able to see the interview questions beforehand so that you could actually prepare your responses, and it wouldn't be fair apparently to do that. But if they did it to everybody, then it would be.” (A47)*

In the case of A33, she was emailed the questions an hour before, which she felt was insufficient for her to prepare. And in the case of one participant, the employer’s failure to acknowledge the applicant’s request for ‘reasonable adjustments’ resulted in an Employment Tribunal:

*“I had declared that I have autism. I asked for ‘reasonable adjustments’. They not only didn't put in reasonable adjustments... in my feedback, they were basically critical of me on the basis of my autism. So, they didn't notice that I'd asked for ‘reasonable adjustments’; they didn't put any in place and then I failed the interview... so I have won an Employment Tribunal on the basis that they discriminated against me (because) of my disability and I really get so angry about it.” (A29)*

During the course of the research, autistic participants, professional stakeholders and one employer argued that the objective for employers should be to create an interview environment that was accessible to all, such that ‘reasonable adjustments’ were not required except in very exceptional cases. One trade union representative commented:

*“There are a whole set of changes people could make and just apply to everyone that wouldn’t require the person to disclose that they were autistic. So, no fluorescent lights. If you must do interviews, do them in rooms where there is not a load of distracting stuff, give people time to acclimatise to the room if they want to. They must ask literal questions and expect literal answers. Recruitment should be as accessible as possible. An accessible place would not need adjustment.” (S2)*

## 5.4 Sensory processing and environment

Due to hyper-sensitivity, many autistic people are affected adversely by their physical surroundings and may experience sensory overload in certain environments. Such distractions may impact on their ability to focus fully on the interview and deliver an optimal performance. The majority of participants stated that they had experienced sensory processing or environmental issues relating to the setting when attending a job interview.

### 5.4.1 The interview setting may affect performance

A majority of participants found that the interview setting inhibited their ability to perform well. In some cases, it was the choice of location that affected their concentration:

*“I find it very difficult… if there isn't really a kind of appropriate place to have an interview, (I had) a walk-in cupboard in the middle of a stock room with loads of brochures stacked to the ceiling. I find that really difficult because I haven't been able to concentrate.” (A10)*

It was not uncommon for retail and customer service job interviews to be held in a cafeteria or coffee shop on site, and participants found themselves distracted by the surroundings:

*“A cafeteria was a no for me because there was just too much going on. There was too much sound and, you know, other focusing. You could hear people talking about how awful their day was going etc.” (A12)*

In general, the lack of privacy in a communal area was the most unsettling for candidates:

*“One (interview) I had at a coffee shop… and there was this couple having a meal, and I was trying to have an interview. I could hear them listening in…” (A24)*

*“They had an office but instead of having the interview in the privacy of the office, it was a Friday… lunchtime and she had it in the middle of the actual café. So, I have to give this interview surrounded by all these customers and… it was just awful.” (A6)*

*“I've been in rooms where people have been walking past or they've been chatting outside the window… sometimes it can be off-putting.” (A17)*

Occasionally, participants experienced extreme forms of setting that affected their concentration:

*“The office was open plan and there was this big glass dome in the middle of the room with two doors… and the lighting was horrendous and every time they shut the door, it was stiflingly hot and I couldn't breathe and I couldn't think and the noise… I couldn't concentrate on who was talking to me… and they had an office dog and at one point they opened the door and the dog wandered in and it was in and out the table and it came and sat at my feet. And it's a bit distracting when you're trying to answer serious questions and there's this b\*\*\*\*\*, great, big, black Labrador weaving in and out your legs… I just could not focus and I kind of did the interview and to this day, I can't tell you anything much about it other than the dog.” (A36)*

### 5.4.2 Sensory overload

The most common sensory problems cited by participants related to lighting, pungent smells and invasive noises. Exposure to these would often inhibit the candidate’s ability to perform well:

*“If the lighting is really harsh, I can't explain how (but) it tires my brain.” (A21)*

*“I do find fluorescent lighting quite difficult… and I try to keep my fringe quite big, that's quite a good shield against the worst of it, if it's overhead.” (A34)*

*“At primary school I… just put my head on the table and that was because of the strip lighting...and the general busyness of the place.” (A49)*

*“I would prefer always to be in a room that has a window or natural light so we can switch off the lights.” (A16)*

Two participants were affected by certain smells such as ‘bleach’, ‘cheese on toast’ and ‘perfume’, as well as the temperature of the room:

*“Perfume in general I struggle with, and particularly sweet-smelling ones can actually cause me a mini migraine. And I’m actually very sensitive to temperatures so some rooms I did find when I've been in interviews that they were very cold. And obviously that made me even more tense and stiff in the body… on top of anxiety, which is normal.” (A16)*

*“If the room is very hot or very cold or very stuffy, I'll struggle.” (A26)*

Noise, in its various forms, was a source of distraction for most, as illustrated by the following three participants:

*“I have hyperacusis so I can hear the light strips, I can hear the electricity going. Fluorescent bulbs give me a headache at the best of times because it's the combination of the light and the noise… I sat through an interview once and… there was a printer in the background, and it had that horrible squeak that they sometimes did and I had to fight not to stick my fingers in my ears because it really, genuinely hurt my ears… the chances are they didn't hear it, or they'd managed to filter it out, and it just hurt.” (A29)*

*“If someone moves in the chair and you can just hear it… that's distracting for me.” (A24)*

*“I do have to be on, you know, a hundred and ten percent overdrive to try and filter out (noise), usually aircon. That's what drives me crazy. Anything to do with vents and that kind of background washing noise I can't stand. But lots of things really, people tapping pens. Someone was playing with a pen in the interview that I was in once. I was just looking at the pen. I wasn’t listening to them. So yeah, very easily distracted.” (A51)*

Sometimes the general decor of the room, such as highly-patterned wallpaper or carpets, could be distracting:

*“If there are busy decorations and other things in the room, that distracts me.” (A45)*

For others, it could be a particular item that drew their attention and caused them to lose focus:

*“If someone is wearing something quirky like a bowtie, I might fixate on that.” (A15)*

*“One thing I did find distracting was one of the interviewers wasn't wearing socks with his suit and I kept looking at his ankles. I'd get distracted by his ankles for some reason, and it was because it was out of context, like to me if you have a formal interview, you should be wearing socks.” (A6)*

Autistic people may be hyper-sensitive to the clothes they wear and one participant prepared for interviews by ‘breaking in’ her interview outfit:

*“I think one of the reasons I do quite like to wear relatively smart clothes most days, even if I'm not really working, is the day I have to put on a shirt and a blazer and go into a meeting, that can be intensely distracting. If it's a clothing type or shoe shape I'm not used to, my body's going twang, twang, twang! I’ve no idea what the question was now because I'm busy thinking my toes feel different in these smart shoes. So, if there's something I'm going to have to do now and again, and it's very important, I just do it most of the time, and then it's not going to be such a jarring course change.” (A34)*

One participant described how she was affected both physically and mentally by the environment:

*“I'm sort of like mentally, emotionally but also physically exhausted because I am so tense. You know a lot of the time it's the sensory overload from like the environment in the room, the lighting, the noise. It makes me really tight and tense.” (A16)*

Sometimes the effect of sensory overload was overwhelming:

*“My senses can be quite extreme. It almost feels like I shut down and everything becomes dull - it's almost like a form of depression sets in dealing with all of those things because so many different noises, depending on how loud they are, can really interfere and affect it (sensory processing).” (A14)*

### 5.4.3 Formality in the conduct of the interview was important for many

For the majority, the conduct of the interview, whether formal or informal, was important in reducing their anxiety, with the vast majority finding a formal set-up, such as a quiet office with table and chairs, most conducive to performing well:

*“I’m definitely in favour of what I would expect to see (formal table and chairs etc) and would be thrown by anything different. Despite the formality of it, and being nervous, it’s more comforting because it’s what you expect.” (A15)*

*“I do (prefer a formal setting) because it's what you expect. You have to do the mental preparation… you have to have some sort of plan in your brain of how it's going to look, how you're going to be able to position yourself, where you're going to sit. And most times, you will sit down at the chair nearest the door, there will be a desk and there will be a panel behind that desk and most times that's roughly true, and it helps you to know what to expect. But when it isn't, it can completely throw you because your entire plan, your expectations, your general ‘I need to do this. I need to do that, I must not stim, I must not do X, Y, Z,’ all of those just go… It's about the expectation and everything just flies away from you. And your brain can't process it… and you can't concentrate on anything else… it's almost like a running through of a well-rehearsed scene.” (A29)*

Others expressed similar views:

*“I probably would find a formal environment a bit better in terms of getting into the right mindset for the interview. It's something where I have to, not quite put on an act, but present myself, in a certain way. And I think the formal setting would actually be better for that… to present myself in the best way possible, and as someone who would be able to do a particular job and can be focused.” (A44)*

*“I would know I was there for a reason because if I were in a more relaxed setting it may give me the impression that… I’m a shoo-in for the job, whereas I was actually being socially observed as well.” (A30)*

*“I would probably say a formal interview. You’ve got the table in the front, the interviewer behind it and the interviewee in front of the table. That's what makes an interview.” (A41)*

For those who preferred a ‘formal’ setting, the difficulty in judging the different social expectations that might arise in an ‘informal’ setting was key:

*“The social rules are clearer, like where to sit and I know what to expect and it's a bit tricky having it informal, knowing when to be professional and when to be casual.” (A45)*

*“In the formal one… it’s a little bit easier because I'm in here not to get to know them but to just answer questions, whereas in the informal setting, if they kind of want to get to know you too, it’s how serious am I supposed to be now? And it's not really understanding the seriousness of like how formal you've got to be.” (A23)*

When asked about the possibility of an informal interview, for example over a cup of coffee, A7 explained that for him it lacked the expected structure but also was inappropriate for the occasion:

*“That wouldn’t fit in with interviewing. It’s too casual and you wouldn’t know what to expect. It’s an interview with no structure. And you’re not supposed to drink coffee when you go for an interview. It makes you too relaxed. You need a set of rules you can follow.” (A7)*

A2 explained that even where she was in familiar surroundings, and being interviewed for an internal post by people she knew, it was still important to have a formal set-up in place:

*“I think actually the things that I have done less well in were the less formal situations and I think that's confusing, especially when I was being interviewed by someone that I knew…. I think… the environment works better if it is more formal actually because then that puts me in a setting to have a formal exchange, as opposed to me on the comfy chair with a low coffee table and being all pally, cosy chit-chatty when … I'm supposed to be selling myself here. The environment didn't suit the requirement… it’s that setting the stage if you like…” (A2)*

One participant gave a similar account where the location and informal conduct of the interview, which was designed to put her at her ease, in fact unsettled her, as it did not accord with her expectations:

*“One experience sticks in my mind regarding an interview for a job… I was led into what looked like a staff room with comfy seating and a coffee table. And there were three members of staff who were actually the interview panel sitting there. And we were meant to make small talk and I just could not understand it because it wasn't my experience of interviews up till then. Apparently, they wanted to put me at ease but that section of the interview I experienced as horrendous. I get very anxious before interviews in any event and it didn't tally with what I expected… I just couldn't make small talk. It's something that I'm not that good at in any case but in the pressurised circumstances I was completely dreadful at it.” (A4)*

Three participants cited the practical advantages of the formal set-up, where the desk or table between interviewer and interviewee allowed them to lay out any notes they had prepared but also provided some ‘cover’, leaving them feeling less exposed, and able to ‘stim’ unobserved, if they needed to:

*“I prefer a table between us because then I can kind of fidget if I need to but be hidden so I don't feel as exposed, and I have my notes in front of me if needed, and the drink. It's just a good space.” (A25)*

*“I would prefer a table between me and the interviewer just so they couldn't see me fidgeting so much. That would be because if it's open, they can see all of your body movements. I'd find that was something else to be worried about and consider whereas if I'm twiddling my legs or something underneath the table, no one's going to see that.” (A42)*

*“I don’t like it when you’re sitting at a kind of a coffee table or something… if you want to stim or something, like I move my hands or my feet, it’s much more obvious and it makes you look quite anxious whereas, I think if you’re sitting opposite, you can get away with a certain amount of stimming without people noticing.” (A26)*

One participant commented that the formal setting lent itself to ‘masking’ and the performance needed to succeed at interview, likening it to a tennis match:

*“I'd prefer a formal setting because I can mask more because obviously it's much more of a kind of tennis match. You know, they’re throwing you a question, you're answering the question. And that's the situation where I'm masking best. And I do want to mask in an interview completely because I want the job, I don't want them to think, ‘Oh, he's a bit odd’ and... I think that coffee table situation - it's harder to know exactly the boundaries between interview and social, which is where I struggle, and you're going to have people coming and going, you know, they might be stopping the interview halfway. ‘Oh, this is Linda. Linda works in accounts’… and I can't be dealing with this.” (A52)*

Even those who, exceptionally, felt more confident in their ability to perform at job interviews were unsettled by informality as it seemed inappropriate for the occasion:

*“…whilst I'm good at interviews, formal interviews, with informal interviews I just completely flail out because how can you sell yourself in an informal chat over a cup of tea?... So, a formal interview when they're firing these questions at you, then I really big it up and feel confident. I know what's going to come up.” (A10)*

Importantly, A10 went on to say that in his experience an interview could be delivered in a relaxed manner within a formal setting:

*“I definitely prefer formal because… I’m going with a suit and/or a shirt and a tie. I want to be taken seriously and I like to know what to expect. And that's why the job at X, even though it didn't work out well for me, the interview was so good because although they didn't have an office, they actually held it at a hotel conference room and… there was a proper waiting room etc. with banners on the door so you knew which company you were going into etc There was a table and you know, they were really nice. I feel you can still have an informal interview in a formal setting… but when it's in a kind of cupboard with loads of stock around you and they're on the phone and there are buzzers going off every second, are they expecting me to be really chilled and kind of relaxed?” (A10)*

Although they were a small minority, not all participants subscribed to the view that a formal setting was better. For example, A17, a science graduate, said that informality was preferable:

*“I think I probably prefer a more informal set-up so it's a bit more like it would be just having a conversation rather than an interview.” (A17)*

A28, who was prone to stimming, thought (contrary to others) that an informal setting would be beneficial:

*“I think it would be difficult to take out a tangle (fidget toy) from my bag (in a formal interview) whereas in an informal setting, I could say, this really helps me focus, so while I reply to your questions, I'll be touching this or moving my fingers along with it… There's always a need to stim.” (A28)*

A48, a student with experience of only a few job interviews for casual work, commented:

*“I feel like doing a formal interview would make me especially nervous. I mean, sometimes I struggle to speak, and the ones I've done, both of the actual jobs I applied for were casual.” (A48)*

Occasionally participants were undecided. A40, who had a degree in psychology and had struggled to obtain employment commensurate with her qualifications, said:

*“I'm in two minds… mainly, I've gone to formal interviews but actually, now I think, I might actually do better in a more informal environment because I'd feel more relaxed. On the other hand, it might be quite noisy and so that would be a big distraction, so then I wouldn't be relaxed. If it was just in one room and it was just the manager and yourself … that would be fine.” (A40)*

For the vast majority, however, the experience of interviews during the pandemic had been online, or by telephone, which some found a more amenable environment. Participants spoke of the benefits of being in a familiar environment where they avoided the stress of travel, and had greater control over their interview performance, including eye contact and stimming:

*“I find it a lot easier on Zooms and stuff… because I don't feel the pressure to look at the person because it's on a screen anyway so it's not really so bad.” (A23)*

*“I can control my sensory environment.” (A28)*

*“It is much easier if you're in your own house and you don’t have to run the gauntlet of the real world to actually get to the building and find the room… I prefer these video calls and being able to see my own face… because if I stop concentrating on what my face is doing, I could look like I'm angry so just being able to flick my eyes until I'm not looking angry… is a big help.” (A34)*

Not all favoured an online or telephone interview, however, as they found the technology challenging:

*“In some ways, it was more relaxing, but on the other hand, I wasn't quite sure whether it was going to go very well because I've had quite a lot of problems with my Wi-Fi. And also, I'd say my mind is not digitally, as it were, connected and that's not natural to me… so a bit of mixture, really.” (A40)*

*“I do prefer to do it in person because electronics are hard for me to hear the quality. I think it's part of the auditory processing.” (A48)*

*“All the interviews I've had recently have been online. The only thing I found a bit of a distraction is that there'd be three interviewers and they'd be at different places on the screen so I'm always wondering (about) eye contact and things like that.” (A42)*

Whatever the format of the interview - face-to-face, online, formal or informal - participants said they would benefit from being given more information about the process in advance so that they could mentally prepare themselves:

*“I wish they would tell you what kind of setup it would be before you went.” (A24)*

*“I might be sort of disconcerted if I was expecting the desk, and then I found it was the low coffee table or whatever. If I thought it could be either, I'd be sort of prepared so it wouldn't worry me so much. But perhaps it would be helpful to be shown what the likely arrangement is because sometimes you go for an interview and it's just one to one, which I would prefer. But more usually, it's a panel of people, and I've had up to eight.” (A32)*

## 5.5 Non-verbal behaviour

The literature indicates the importance of non-verbal behaviour in creating a good impression at job interviews. Typical modes of behaviour expected from a successful candidate are a firm handshake, good eye contact, good posture and ‘positive’ facial expressions. For the autistic candidate, some or all of these may pose a challenge:

*“When I left University, we had the careers service tell us how to do well in interviews, and there were lots of booklets and things that kept stressing looking in the eyes and a firm handshake. So, I made a list of all these things… like you have to tick these boxes … but none of this really comes all that naturally to me. I think it just feels uncomfortable.” (A16)*

### 5.5.1 Eye contact was a challenge for most autistic participants

‘Good’ eye contact is generally considered to be essential at a job interview. According to recruitment professionals, maintaining steady eye contact is both a sign of respect - indicating one’s interest in the interviewer and the topic under discussion - and conveys a sense of confidence and self-esteem. The literature suggests also that for neurotypicals, different gender norms may apply in relation to this behaviour: women generally engage in greater eye contact than men to form an emotional connection with their interlocutor and, it is argued, as a reflection of their greater propensity to listen (Webbink, 1974; Kleinke, 1986). They may also avert their gaze more than men in situations that they find threatening or uncomfortable (Kleinke, 1986). Men, on the other hand, are reportedly more likely than women to use eye contact to denote status and superiority in an encounter (Nelson, 2010).

For the majority of autistic participants of both genders, however, eye contact is the most challenging non-verbal behaviour they are required to perform at interviews. In many cases, participants were unable to explain why they had difficulty in maintaining eye contact, and a minority said that they had never thought about it. But for the majority, it was a lifelong condition they had struggled with:

*“Maybe it's to do with - I've never thought about it so I'm guessing - maybe it's to do with the movement of the eyes of people and that it's distracting.” (A16)*

*“I often do find it difficult. My eyes will flip from time to time, but I understand its importance and I try.” (A12)*

*“It’s extremely difficult. My eyes want to wander off and scan the environment... by scanning the room, I am trying to find something to fix my eyesight on. It is hard to do as my autism wants to keep looking at other items in the room.” (A7)*

A14 and A28 spoke of the physical impact of looking into others’ eyes, which could be overwhelming:

*“They're quite piercing things... and it's probably another reason why I just never notice people's eye colour as well.” (A14)*

*“I think of it as repelling magnets. So, it feels as if their eyes have the same energy as my eyes, and if you try to connect two magnets that repel, you can feel like a kind of pressure in the air… like my eyes are repelled by their eyes and it’s really uncomfortable. It has nothing to do with how they feel about me. It's nothing to do with me being scared of them. It just doesn't feel natural.” (A28)*

For others, the experience was not so much the physical impact of making contact with another person’s eyes as the sense that, in so doing, they were exposing themselves to a possible threat:

*“I might subconsciously feel a little bit intimidated when I see people looking at me.” (A18)*

Similarly, A48, an American college student, saw eye contact as an unwanted connection that might be revealing to others, even to her parents:

*“I honestly don't know what most people's eyes look like. I was dating a person in high school and they were my best friend since elementary and I did not know their eye colour… I can assume my parents’ eye colours by genetics but I don't really know what they look like. I don't really like how they move because I feel… there's this cognisance behind those eyes. And so, if I'm making eye contact, then they're also making eye contact with me. It's like a communication that I don’t want to engage in.” (A48)*

A13, an undergraduate who wore sunglasses in his daily life, also believed that in engaging in eye contact, he would be revealing his private thoughts to strangers:

*“With strangers you never know whether they’re trying to read you… It's like when you walk into a room and everyone is speaking in a foreign language, and you wonder if they’re talking about you. That sort of uncomfortable feeling… it's always like they’re going to find me out, that I’m putting on a persona… non- autistic people can know a lot about you by looking at you.” (A13)*

One participant, a teaching assistant, explained that she avoided eye contact because she was unable to ‘read’ other people, and attempts to engage with others in this way left her confused and full of self-doubt:

*“You look at someone and it just makes you feel uncomfortable and then you (think) they've looked at me too long now, let's look away. Or you don't know what they're going to say next or… how they’re feeling. And I can't predict any of it, so if I just don't look at their face, I don't know what's going on and it doesn't kind of make me feel anything. Whereas if I look at their faces and can't figure anything out from what I'm seeing, it's harder because then it goes through your mind… did I do that right? Did I say that wrong? Whereas if I just don't look, I can't feel anything because I'm not looking.” (A23)*

In some cases, participants viewed it as a form of intimacy that was inappropriate with strangers:

*“I have absolutely no problem sitting across the dining table and looking into my husband's eyes because he's gorgeous and because he’s my husband. But I don't want to look at someone who's possibly going to hire me for £20,000 pounds… it's very much an emotional thing. I don't have as much problem giving eye contact to somebody that I'm intimate with, that is family. But when it comes to anyone else, I can't. It makes me so uncomfortable.” (A36)*

In trying to overcome a natural aversion to eye contact, three participants said they had to guard against overcompensating by staring at others:

*“I've had feedback that I'm giving too much eye contact because when I was little, I was told you have to give all the eye contact because otherwise people think you're lying. That comes across as staring now so I have to keep switched on all the time, like break contact, make contact, break contact. It's hard.” (A34)*

*“When I was about 14… I was trying really hard to make eye contact and I remember staring very intently and directly for ages at my geography teacher's eyes and that obviously wasn't right either because it was just too much, too intense. At the time I thought I was doing it right but looking back, you know, I'm confident that I wasn't.” (A52)*

*“I don't think I have problems with eye contact. Although I have been told sometimes my eye contact is too much because that can happen as well.” (A40)*

In the case of A44 and A30, the issue of gender norms appeared to influence their attitude to sustained eye contact as they expressed concern that it might be misconstrued as a form of sexual advance:

*“I find it hard to work out what's an appropriate level of eye contact - the idea that you shouldn't do too little because it looks like you're not interested, whereas you shouldn't do too much because that can be threatening, particularly if it's a female interviewer. I don't want to look like, you know… there's something almost sexual about making too much eye contact. And I don't want to bring that into the situation.” (A44)*

*“I try to be careful to look rather than stare, particularly when it comes to members of the opposite sex.” (A30)*

Two participants had been unaware that they were not engaging in eye contact until they were told:

*“I was smacked quite a lot at primary school - this was the early 1970s - for not making eye contact with the teachers when they were admonishing me. I didn't know I wasn't making eye contact.” (A49)*

Similarly, one participant believed he had been engaging in eye contact but following his diagnosis of autism in his twenties, realised that he had not:

*“I've known for a long time that I am autistic… but one thing that I thought I could do was eye contact, and I thought wow, it's just something that I've learned. And then in the diagnosis assessment, the lady said to me, where exactly on my face are you looking right now? And I was looking at the bridge of her nose, and I thought that was eye contact but it turns out that's not eye contact… I don't know why I don't like it. I just don't do it.” (A52)*

One participant said he had developed a coping strategy to appear to engage in eye contact with his interlocutors, while actually looking at a different part of the face - such as the bridge of the nose - or not fixing on any particular point. E1, who spoke on behalf of his employer, an investment bank, and was himself autistic, explained:

*“I don't make eye contact with anybody. People believe I do but I'm looking at their forehead.” (E1).*

Other participants expressed similar views:

*“Sometimes I might look at the lower part of their face instead of looking at their eyes. Sometimes I find that easier.” (A18)*

*“I try and look at their nose at least. And then if I can do that, I'll look at them for a bit… It's just after long periods I'll just look away a little bit and I do have to watch myself to do it, like to go back to it, but I don't force myself too much because actually they (employers) shouldn't just judge me on just that.” (A23)*

### 5.5.2 Eye contact was regarded as part of the interview ‘performance’

All participants were aware that good eye contact was expected of them at interview, and A15 spoke explicitly of the ‘performance’ needed to create the ‘right impression’ with potential employers:

*“It’s something I’ve drilled into myself to make eye contact with everyone. It’s a performance I’m putting on at that point.” (A15).*

A16 and A25 spoke similarly of the strategy involved in appearing to engage in eye contact:

*“I'm just scanning so it's almost like pretending.” (A16)*

*“It's drilled into you that that's part of presenting yourself and seeming personable and making connections and building rapport and everything. So, I feel like I have to think to include it and, when there are multiple interviewers, try to remember to focus on the one that's asked you the question, and the intervals to do it. So, it's kind of hard in the moment to know if I've managed it well or if I’ve been staring.” (A25)*

A49, a veterinary nurse, mentioned that a lack of eye contact was associated with poor character and untrustworthiness, and speculated whether that had affected the outcome of her job interviews:

*“I think the mythology was that you were dishonest… if you don’t give direct eye contact, that you are somehow shady or dishonest. So, I think that might have been going on at interviews. It’s just like I’m really trying to tell you the truth but I’m not looking at you so maybe you’re interpreting this as me being dishonest.” (A49)*

A36 spoke similarly:

*“I find it so hard to look people in the eye or have them look at me… and I wonder sometimes if that has done for me in job interviews where it's: ‘Well, she can't make eye contact, it's shifty’, that kind of thing…” (A36)*

As eye contact was regarded as such an essential element of the ‘performance’ required at job interviews to make a good impression, participants such as A28 and A16 expressed their frustration at the unfairness and illogical interpretation that was attached to those who failed in this respect:

*“Neurotypical people have all sorts of weird preconceptions about what eye contact means, like they think I’m not listening to them if I don't look at them. Like, how stupid! I listen to you with my ears, not my eyes. They think that I don't really care about what they're saying if I'm not looking at them ... What about my eyes could suggest that I'm not interested in you? Some people need to look at other things in order to focus … to draw or look at an object like a glitter pen.” (A28)*

*“I've heard people say that you look in the eyes to get approval or a connection with the other person but I don't understand. I don't get it. What am I supposed to see? Am I supposed to see the answer in the eye?” (A16)*

A50, who originated from eastern Europe, spoke of the cultural differences relating to eye contact:

*“Definitely with eye contact I learned more (to do it in this country) than I had before. However, it takes my focus away because I'm focusing on the eye contact. I keep reminding myself to bring my eyes back to look into the person's eyes and then I get stuck in the middle of the sentence because I forgot what I was about to say.” (A50)*

Like many participants, A52 spoke of the need to ‘mask’ in order to convey the persona and deliver the performance that would be acceptable to the interviewer, but that it was more difficult with eye contact:

*“How do you mask with eye contact? I found my way (by looking at the bridge of the nose) but by looking into somebody's eyes I'm not going to be able to do it easily because I don't know exactly how long to look. I don't know where to look.” (A52)*

### 5.5.3 Sustaining eye contact was stressful and impacted on responses to questions

A14, who had recently been diagnosed with autism remarked that he could make initial eye contact but was unable to sustain it for long. One participant, commented:

*“I can only do it for a certain length of time and then I have to look away. And I didn't notice that for a long time. Obviously, it makes more sense now I've got the diagnosis. But for example, even when talking to you, sometimes I'll make eye contact, but I can't obviously do it for too long.” (A14)*

In order to sustain eye contact, coping strategies might be used at interview. A13 and A16 described their own approach:

*“They had like a big desk and I was just crunching my hands underneath the desk because I wanted to keep looking at them.” (A13)*

*“It's an extra thing that I have to do that stresses me out. I think I've practised (eye contact) a lot in my life. But it still makes me uncomfortable… I know that I have to in an interview, so it's like a mental dialogue in my head that's running: keep eye contact or keep looking at them. But I'm uncomfortable looking people in the eye but you learn, I've got to do just that because people don't like it (if you don’t).” (A16)*

Maintaining eye contact was particularly difficult when participants were trying to respond to questions. A25 referred to the need ‘to look away when I think of an answer’. This highlights a fundamental problem for many autistic interviewees (as well as some neurotypical people) who know they are expected to engage in eye contact in order to form a ‘good impression’ but are unable to process their thoughts when they do so:

*“If I'm thinking of an answer, I’m more likely to look away because the eye contact would stop me thinking properly. So, it's managing all of that when they're asking you questions and you need to decide on the right answer.” (A25)*

A44 said that for him it was a choice between maintaining good eye contact or giving a thoughtful answer:

*“I try very consciously to make eye contact, but it's something that I don't do intuitively, I do it consciously and it does take up energy. So, if I'm in an interview situation where I'm directing energy more to answering the questions… I would just accept that I'm probably not making very good eye contact. But I just need to use what energy and concentration I have got for answering the questions.” (A44)*

One student gave a graphic description of how eye contact impacted on her mentally and physically:

*“I haven't made a lot of eye contact with people... it feels scary and distracting to me... I've had a lot of times where people would tell me, ‘Look at me while I'm talking to you’, and I do understand like physically how that works... and I'm making the executive decision to look at you and to listen to what you're saying and show that I understand. But also, when I do that, and I make eye contact, it’s like everything leaves, like my brain is gone and the air is stopped in my throat.” (A48)*

Problems with maintaining eye contact were exacerbated when candidates were examined by a panel of interviewers rather than in a one-to-one dialogue:

*“I look down when I’m thinking but then I remind myself to look at everyone on the panel.” (A15)*

*“I feel more comfortable with just one person and there have been times when a person (on an interview panel) has asked me a question and I’ve looked at somebody different to answer, so I don't think that looks very good.” (A18)*

*“I found the interviews where it is like a panel, I don't know who to look at.” (A45)*

One participant, a trade union representative and herself autistic, expressed the view that the requirement for ‘good eye contact’ was an imposition of normative behaviour on individuals who, by the nature of their condition, would find it difficult or impossible to comply:

*“All the books I have read on autism and employment were about giving advice to autistic people on essentially how to pretend to be neurotypical when applying for a job. A particular thing I read… was where X (a published author and work coach) was coaching a lad who was in trouble and under threat of the sack from his manager for not making eye contact at meetings. So, she coached him in how to make eye contact. If it were me, I would have rung up his manager and said, ‘What are you playing at? Why does he have to make eye contact? What’s important is that he listens, concentrates and contributes.’ It’s like telling gay people to act straight to fit in at work.” (S2)*

### 5.5.4 Non-verbal behaviour (excluding eye contact)

In addition to maintaining good eye contact, applicants are expected to conform to a number of neurotypical behaviours in order to make ‘a good impression’ at job interviews. Typical advice to be found on recruitment agency and university websites is:

*“Give a firm handshake to your interviewer(s) before and after the session; throughout the interview, remember to smile frequently and maintain eye contact” “dress appropriately” and “keep hand gestures under control.” (www.indeed.com, no date)*

For many autistic candidates these behaviours do not come naturally and indeed may be a source of discomfort or stress. The conventional handshake, for example, which some participants said they had practised as part of their interview preparation, presented a number of difficulties. In the case of A33, it was due to the physicality and hygiene aspects of the gesture; in others it was the problem of judging the mechanics and social etiquette of the process:

*“My friend taught me how to do a firm handshake years ago. So, I learned all of this stuff but I don't want to touch people.” (A33)*

A23, who worked in the educational sector and was often called upon to greet colleagues and parents with a handshake, explained her difficulty, particularly in an interview setting:

*“I don't like handshakes because I don't really want to touch someone else's hands, especially someone I don't know. But then also it is knowing when to do it, and how long you're supposed to do it for, and how hard to shake their hand. It's like there's so many things about it… a firm handshake I dread every time. I'm so glad for Covid at the moment because of the handshake… it's been so much easier not having to shake hands, and just say, ‘Hello’. Whereas usually… I'm just kind of hovering around them. Okay, am I supposed to shake their hand or not? Am I supposed to sit down? It's quite hard, and then obviously the eye contact throughout the whole. No, it's very hard, harder than the questions.” (A23)*

A48, a college student in the United States, expressed her dislike of the gesture and her frustration that so much importance was attached it:

*“I remember at my high school; we did these practice interviews every year and I would usually do well but I couldn't do any of the things like eye contact or handshaking or the way you have to sit. I would love to ask, ‘Can you not base my work ethic on whether or not I can do a handshake?’… I don't want to touch others. I don't really understand the purpose of the handshake. I mean, I suppose it's a tradition but to me, it doesn't seem necessary. I feel like at that point, you've already greeted each other or you've nodded or something, and that should be sufficient. And also, a lot of people don't wash their hands after they go to the bathroom and that really grosses me out.” (A48)*

A52, a gay graduate, believed his aversion to the firm handshake was due both to his autism and to the ‘macho’ nature of the gesture, and how it was perceived:

*“The firm handshake I absolutely passionately hate and I think it's partly to do with autism, I think it's partly to do with me personally. I'm a gay man. I'm very effeminate. It's a very masculine thing to do that firm handshake. I hate that (and) the germs as well. You know it's just not something that I would ever do, unless I have to… and I don't think it relates to how well somebody's going to perform in a job, but I think that it's perceived as something that does.” (A52)*

A44 was unaffected by the physical contact of the handshake but found the process confusing and socially awkward:

*“I find it awkward. If someone offers me their hand, I don't have a problem with shaking it. I find it very difficult to know if they don't offer their hands. I get confused. Am I supposed to shake their hands particularly? If I'm walking into a room when there's a panel of people behind a desk and none of them moves to get up and shake my hand, am I supposed to go over and shake hands before I sit down… or after the interview? And usually what happens is a kind of social anxiety gets the better of me and I don't make the first move of initiating a handshake…” (A44)*

A characteristic of some autistic people is to seek out deep pressure stimulation as a means of calming their hypersensitivity. Exceptionally, A43, a world champion in a contact sport, said that for her the problem was a weak handshake:

*“I think it’s when the handshakes are really like loose (it’s a problem) ... I like the squeezy things because even though it's somebody else touching you, I like anything that squeezes. It gives me a little bit of a calm feeling.” (A43)*

Candidates are often advised to ‘smile frequently’, which for many on the autism spectrum was viewed as artificial and part of their ‘masking’:

*“You must smile... then you must say this. It's like you just learn how to do it and. I feel like a robot literally and then I lose myself and it takes ages to come back to who I actually am because I'm so masked.” (A33)*

*“Unless I absolutely love you, and I haven't seen you in years, for me to smile at a stranger I almost have to think about it before I do it. There are lots of photographs of me as a child (not smiling).” (A49)*

Even the correct dress code for interviews can be difficult for those on the spectrum to judge, particularly as some are averse to seeing their reflection in the mirror:

***“****Choosing what to wear… I've had to have a lot of help with that over time about presenting a professional appearance without being too stuffy or too casual and to dress for the time of year as well. (I remember) turning up at an interview with damp hands because it was a beautiful summer's day, but I'm wearing a thick wool suit and an overcoat and my boots because they were the smartest things I had, and I was about four million degrees warmer than I should have been, literally a hot mess. I did not get that job.” (A34)*

While the advice for interviewees is to ‘keep hand gestures under control’, many autistic people engage in what is known as ‘stimming’ as a way of coping with stress or anxiety. Examples of this behaviour are rapid hand movements, finger-flicking or sometimes chair rocking. Participants commented on their tendency to stim, whether consciously or unconsciously, and their efforts to control or disguise it at interview:

*“I think I just don't always realise I'm fidgeting… it's just like a subconscious thing.” (A45)*

A25 spoke of the constant challenge to control her stimming while trying to deal with the interviewer’s questions:

*“I think others can just walk in and … talk and command the room or the attention and feel confident. But it’s always managing the behavioural aspect as well as the questions… that makes it harder … because it's more likely to go out the window when I'm trying to answer the question. Then I'm not as in control of the more obviously neurodivergent signs … like keeping the hands down but also avoiding clicking pens so not having a pen in my hand because that can annoy people.” (A25)*

One graduate commented on the possible misinterpretation of stimming by employers:

*“I think it's important for people to be at least slightly aware that repetitive movements that are stimming are a necessity for us. It doesn't mean that we're not paying attention.” (A28)*

A34 explained her own tendency to stim, including wiggling her toes and straightening her hair. She criticised the constraints imposed on those attending interview, where such behaviour is deemed inappropriate, compared with other settings, such as an exam room:

*“One of the reasons I have quite wide-toed shoes is I wiggle my toes a lot which is self-comforting behaviour largely from being a bit stressed, or agitated or whatever. But fidgeting in an interview is not really acceptable... and I have an excessively developed awareness of what my hair follicles are doing… so, say I go to a job interview and on the way there, my hair is blown in some way, the urge to get my hand up and just make it all the way that it's supposed to lie… would not be a good look in an interview. But you wouldn't be (told), ‘You mustn't touch your hair’ in an exam. It's a constraint and it is stressful.” (A34)*

Similarly, an undergraduate who had a propensity to ‘fidget’ or ‘use his hands’ when talking to people, attributed his lack of success at interviews possibly to his non- verbal behaviour:

*“When I’m speaking, I'm just using my hands too often or fidgeting or just things like that… they (employers) might consider those to be distracting in the workplace.” (A14)*

He went on to explain that he had tried to suppress these behaviours while at school but that it was counter-productive, and the effort in trying to control such reflex actions inhibited his overall ability to perform:

*“I'm just wondering if it's really fair to judge me on that if it's something that helps me cope or do the job more efficiently… I’ll tell you what it kind of feels like… say somebody that has Tourette’s. It's the same kind of feeling trying to control your behaviours. It makes you feel very uncomfortable, and certainly unfortunately in school I did try and control it and it just kind of made me unhappy… You just have to fidget and do those things. It’s the completely wrong thing to do (making people change) and it won't even benefit people in the workplace because they (employers) wouldn't get the best out of their staff.” (A14)*

Participants spoke of the unfairness of the criteria applied to autistic people when being assessed for a job, where social etiquette and neurotypical behaviour appeared to take precedence over the ability to perform well in the actual job. A34, for example, observed:

*“I do know people... who are so anxious around other people that they don't know very well, they'll have to stim most of the time... just to get through it… and that might stop them from getting a job they'd be very good at. And I think that's outrageous, really because of people not understanding that a lot of autistic people need to rock, or sway or stim in some other way.” (A34)*

Similarly, A27, a middle-aged, skilled technician with a successful work record, was struggling to re-enter the current job market following a period of ill health and felt defeated by the social aspects of the interview:

*“You could be in a company like me for 15 years… (I've) worked very hard, done some exemplary service where literally I ran multiple vocational groups… ‘star’ worker...but the truth is when it really came down to it (applying for jobs) all that work, that diploma, that qualification, it just came down to the social meeting. You are expected to perform at an extremely high social level. No wonder autistic people are unemployed because the fact is they should really be given access to demonstrate their skills rather than discriminating (against them) on purely a social interview.” (A27)*

## 5.6 Responding to interview questions

In order to respond well to interview questions, the candidate must both physically process the words and understand the meaning of the question. A condition commonly found in those on the autism spectrum is poor auditory processing, where individuals experience problems in distinguishing and processing sound. In addition, many people will have difficulty with executive function, including cognitive flexibility and working memory. In the context of job interviews, this may impact on their ability to draw on their previous work experience to provide interviewers with examples of their skills and competencies. Autistic people are also more prone to interpret a question literally rather than understand the intention of the question. An example might be, ‘Do you have experience of working in a team?’ which a neurotypical person would interpret as an invitation to describe their experiences of teamwork, whereas an autistic person might simply reply, ‘Yes’, believing they had fully answered the question.

### 5.6.1 Problems with auditory processing and executive function

A14, an undergraduate who had applied unsuccessfully for a number of part-time jobs, explained his difficulties in processing the interviewer’s questions:

*“I get auditory processing issues so sometimes I can't necessarily make out what somebody's saying. But it doesn't necessarily mean that I’m not hearing as I’m picking up these really subtle noises all around me... Sometimes I have to pause to make my thoughts coherent because obviously if the interview goes on for a long time, it can be difficult to focus. And it's frustrating because I want to get back into it but… I need a quick break in between to collect my thoughts and then carry on.” (A14)*

Similar problems were experienced by A21 and A44:

*“I can hear but I cannot make sense of what I'm hearing sometimes, either because there's too much going on or because I can hear the words or sounds but I can't process the meaning fast enough… and because, of course, the other person is expecting a response, I do start getting stressed.” (A21)*

*“I have a problem actually processing the words spoken and sometimes, particularly if I'm very nervous, which I usually am in an interview situation, sometimes it just doesn't sink in what is being said. And then I find myself wondering, should I ask them to repeat the question or should I try and bluff my way through almost based on what I have been able to pick up? And that can be very challenging.” (A44).*

A15, who had a master’s degree in socio-linguistics, observed that her difficulty with auditory processing must create a poor impression on the employer:

*“I think I come across as slow when I’m talking, which doesn’t put me in a good light.” (A15)*

Like many who experienced this particular condition, she avoided applying for jobs or pursuing a job application that involved using the telephone:

*“I personally avoid applying for jobs involving the telephone because of my processing difficulties, although I mask them well… I applied to X (a major public sector employer) but it was a telephone interview and I hate taking telephone calls and I hate making them.” (A15)*

In order to overcome the problems of auditory processing, participants said they would prefer to have the questions in advance so they could give a considered response rather than struggle to answer on the spot. A15 argued that such an arrangement would not place her at an advantage but rather would create a level playing field with neurotypical people:

*“I need the questions in advance. It’s not an advantage because even having read the questions before, it’s just as daunting because the difficulty is getting the words out in a pressurised interview.” (A15)*

Problems relating to executive functioning where, for example, participants were asked to give specific examples of previous work experience disadvantaged them at job interviews. A45, who has a master’s degree, explained:

*“I think sometimes I need longer to answer a question (and)… sometimes I can misinterpret questions as well… I think as well like... as you can sort of see now, I can’t always get what I’m saying out and I think if it's a job, they go on your performance and how confident you seem and for some people with autism, it's not a very good reflection of their ability.” (A45)*

Other participants, all graduates, had similar difficulties:

*“It just takes me a while to find the answer in my brain… even if I know it, it takes time to understand what the question is about and then to find the piece of information that is hidden very deep somewhere there and, you know, it's like a labyrinth and I have to find the way.” (A50)*

*“Sometimes employers ask you on the spot to give an example of how you've acted in such and such a situation and I am so stressed that I can't find an example, you know, thinking… which would be the most applicable. That will appear to me later in the day or perhaps the next day, once I've recovered. It will suddenly appear - I should have said that, that one fits perfectly.” (A16)*

*“I was told once that what I was saying didn't flow. And I'm not surprised it didn't flow. I was really nervous trying to think of examples for them. I feel if my conversation didn't flow very well in an interview that's (because it’s) in an interview setting. It doesn't mean that it would be like that in a different kind of conversation.” (A42)*

A18 spoke of a strategy she had adopted to help alleviate these problems:

*“…I have started keeping a notebook with suggestions for interviews. I have been making notes of experiences in the past that I can refer to, and before an interview I will read through the book so that I've got it in my mind and then I can think of something hopefully without too much trouble. But previously, before starting to keep my notebook, I did find that a challenge.” (A18)*

Another participant commented also on the sense of frustration when the interviewer did not give her the time she needed to reply, particularly with multiple-part questions:

*“…it's worse when I get asked a two-part question. You're trying to think about the answer but also there comes that worry about I have to reply now. I don't have time because it's happened in the past… I was trying to think of the answer, maybe looking at my notes, that the interviewer would step in and ask me another question like they were impatient. And that obviously made me more anxious and put me off … ” (A16)*

A25 had a similar experience:

*“You can't just sit for ages thinking of the answer because it's an awkward silence. So, I feel like I need to rush through them, getting an answer ready but still needing to think so then I end up starting one way, but not finishing. Or you think you might need to finish a different way because of actually deciding that that would be a more appropriate answer. So, I still don't know... if you're allowed to say, ‘Can I just think about it?’ I don't think you can. It's just all meant to be a smooth transition, isn't it? But a minute to think would be nice.” (A25)*

### 5.6.2 Interpreting language literally

Seven participants referred to their literal interpretation of language that could lead to misunderstanding and a failure to address the intended meaning of a question. A7, a volunteer helper at a local hospital, was perplexed at the reactions from visitors who would ask if he knew where a particular department or ward was. He would reply that he did, without providing any further information, having failed to understand that he was being asked for directions. A tendency to respond with literal precision to questions - without interpreting their intended meaning - can have implications for autistic interviewees:

*“There is one problem that I come across all the time and that is words with a double or hidden meaning. A question that I am constantly asked at work is, ‘Do you know where?’ followed by a department or gate number. I reply ‘Yes, I do’ or ‘Yes, thank you.’ They will give me an odd stare or say I am being rude. What they really want are the directions to where they are going. Sometimes they just say, ‘Gate 12’, again they want directions. I have had people prod me with their letters, they want me to check them in, but they do not ask… Any questions put by the interviewer must be clear and precise for people like me to understand what the question is.” (A7)*

One employer recalled a job applicant waiting outside the building for 45 minutes because of a lack of understanding due to literal interpretation:

*“…it still haunts me where an autistic candidate was going for an assessment and it's obviously a very, very large shop and there's a separate entrance in the side road for (staff). So, in our invitation, we say, you need to arrive at the (staff) entrance at whatever time (but) the autistic candidate waited outside for 45 minutes because we weren't clear enough to say, ‘You need to go through the door and give your name to reception.’” (E3)*

Autistic applicants cited similar difficulties with interview questions:

*“I will give quite minimal answers So someone will say, ‘Have you done this before and I'll go, ‘Yes’, unless they say ‘Oh how do you mean by that? Can you give an example?’ Then I'll give an example but I don't realise automatically that I need to add more on to the answer… until I kind of hear the pause and I think they might want more than this.” (A23)*

*“I think my issue is with whether I should interpret these questions literally. Whether I should be generalising a bit more or being really specific. And I also worry about whether I'm not saying enough and they want me to say more.” (A28)*

*“I really struggle when questions aren't specific and I remember speaking to a manager once and her explaining to me about always giving an example even when they don't ask. So, one interview I did, they said to me ‘Is case recording important?’ And I was like, well yes. And the feedback was, ‘You should have given some examples.’ But I was like, you didn't ask for examples, you asked if case recording was important, and the answer is yes. I have found it really difficult in the past when they don't ask exactly what the question is.” (A26)*

In some cases, the autistic person will realise the intended meaning of the question but it may take time to register:

*“I remember giving a very ‘autistic’ answer in an interview last year for a language assistant. I was asked, “Have you got experience of so and so, and I just said ‘Yes’ and did not elaborate. And then I realised they were asking for examples and not a monosyllabic answer.” (A4)*

 One participant, a trade union representative who is herself autistic, explained the need for greater precision when questioning those on the autism spectrum in order to elicit an appropriate response in the level of detail required:

*“My son (who is autistic) failed an interview because he did not give detailed enough answers but they did not tell him what level of detail they required. He was asked to give an example of the time he worked on a project as part of a team. What they should have said is, ‘What was the project about? Who was involved? How many people were in the team? How long it took, what the outcome was...’ He’s not telepathic.” (S2)*

The scope for misunderstanding and assumptions on both sides where autistic people may present as neurotypical was highlighted by S5, a labour market intermediary:

*“It’s a real problem... because you know that a lot of our clients are very bright and often very well qualified and because it's a hidden disability, particularly if they haven't disclosed their diagnosis... (the interviewer) will assume that he’s just asked a very straightforward question.” (S5)*

Where individuals did disclose, and ask for changes in how questions were framed as part of their ‘reasonable adjustments’, they reported a mixed response. A7 said he asked for closed questions for one interview but*“they did not know what they were. They said, ‘Tell me about yourself’, which could mean anything”.* Like the example given by S2 (above) he (and many autistic people) experienced difficulty judging the length of his answers when dealing with open questions, in his case giving too lengthy a response: *“I just keep on answering until I run out of things to say, which is probably not what they want.” (A7)*

A15, on the other hand, recalled that she had notified her potential employer in advance of the need for ‘reasonable adjustments’, advising them: *“Because I will be processing questions, please be prepared if I ask to have the question repeated or paraphrased”,* which they obliged her with at interview. S5, a labour market intermediary, stressed the importance of clarity and precision in the interviewer’s questions:

*“…making sure that the interview questions are phrased in plain English, that they're not multi-part questions, that they're not ambiguous. And a lot of the time the people who've written them have no idea how they're going to be perceived by an autistic candidate. And there have been so many examples over the years of things being loosely phrased where the person who's written the question has made the unconscious assumption that the person answering it will have the same context for it, which obviously isn't the case. You know, ‘How did you find your last job?’ ‘In the A to Z.’ You know, things like that.” (S5)*

### 5.6.3 The ‘icebreaker’ poses a challenge for many autistic people

Icebreakers are questions that are asked at the beginning of an interview with the intention of putting the candidate at ease before posing more challenging questions. Typical openers are ‘Did you have a good journey?’, ‘What is the best piece of advice you have received?’ or ‘Tell me about yourself.’ For autistic people, however, they often pose a greater challenge than the job-related questions, given their lack of specificity and discursive nature. Two participants explained their difficulties as follows:

*“I’ve been at this game for 40 years and one of the first questions I expect is, ‘Tell me about yourself.’ And I still do not know how to answer that. I just have no idea … and the best I’ve come up with is that the person is trying to find what I have got in common with them and the job. But I don’t know how to try and get that across and so if that comes up, already I begin to lose it there… I’ve asked people like job coaches if they can help me, give me a series of examples of how to respond to ‘Tell me about yourself.’” (A32)*

*“I always expect to get it (‘Tell me about yourself’) and I try to prepare in advance but whenever it comes, everything goes out of your head to be honest … I've had that question many times, but I still probably couldn't actually answer three things straight about myself and be confident about it. I always take a while to answer that one.” (A23)*

Although not an icebreaker, other participants described their bafflement at certain questions put to them:

*“It was for a support worker role and one of the questions was, ‘What makes you, you?’ I asked them if they could clarify it and they said, ‘What makes Jane, Jane?’ (not actual name). So, I had no idea what to say, and a friend who worked for the organisation years later and was doing these interviews (said)… they wanted you to say something like... this is how I was brought up, these are my values, but I'm open to other people's values. But that wasn't the question. Like how would you know how to answer that?” (A26)*

*“When they say, ‘Give us one fun fact about yourself’ or something like that, I never know what things people already know or what they don't know. What do they really want to hear? About what I like, what I do or what I have done? I want them to ask straightforward (questions) like, ‘Have you had other jobs?’ or maybe ‘Tell us about your education or something you're passionate about.’” (A48)*

S7, who is the chairman of an organisation supporting ‘high-functioning’ autistic people seeking employment - and himself autistic - participated in a training session where an employer (a law firm) was invited to conduct their ‘usual’ interview to see how it would be experienced by those on the autism spectrum. He gave a detailed account of the level of confusion and anxiety induced by the introductory question which the employer regarded as the ‘icebreaker’:

*“I knew that I wasn't really in a job interview, we were actually in a hotel foyer. I knew I didn't need to be traumatised by the question but… I think a lot of autistic folks …can be really in the moment, even though it's something completely different to what they've actually understood. So… the question (was): ‘If you asked your friends what your three top attributes were, what would they say?’… And so … I started off from trauma …, Do I have any friends? Right. So …I needed to define friends…Well, if that means, can I sometimes phone that person up and ask them how they are … and occasionally might go to the theatre with them or go for a meal, … I’ve got maybe two or three people I could say, ‘Okay, they're friends.’ Then I had to get my head to the next part of the question, ‘What would they say if you ask them what your top attributes were?’ Well, I never have asked them that, and I never would ask them that. So how could I possibly know the answer to that? … So, then I jumped from there to, ‘Right, what I'm being asked to do is … lie. I've never asked, will never ask so I have to make the answer up. Okay, well lying doesn't come particularly naturally to a person on the spectrum … so that's another trauma … So, I thought, ‘All right, they're looking for three skill sets that might get me the job.’ And so, I blurted out three possible answers. And the trainers were looking at me thinking, ‘What the hell's going on here …?’ And… I could see myself doing that in a real job interview ... and the interviewers would look aghast and think, ‘My goodness, what's the problem here? Why is he behaving that way?’ And that would have set me back for the rest of the interview. So, then they said it was the icebreaker… but if an autistic person had that as their first question, something similar … may have happened and completely destroyed the entire chances of that person.” (S7)*

S7’s account illustrates the gulf that may exist between the neurotypical interviewer and autistic interviewee where the very question designed to ease the individual into the interviewing process had the opposite effect and made him deeply anxious.

### 5.6.4 Hypothetical questions

Alongside the problem of literal interpretation, autistic job applicants are likely to struggle with hypothetical questions that are frequently asked in a conventional job interview. Questions that require them to speculate on future events or discuss a hypothetical scenario are problematic, as autistic people often lack the ‘Theory of Mind’ or social imagination to make sense of abstract ideas, or to describe situations outside their personal experience:

*“’What would I do?’ is always tricky for me, unless I've been in that exact scenario. I mean it applies to my personal life as well... I struggle, for example, if a friend loses their parent, I struggle to offer anything to them because apart from, ‘Oh, I'm so sorry.’ Because I haven't been in that situation, I can't put myself into it. I don't know what to say, I don't know what to do. It's the same with job interviews. If they come up with a question, which they often do, and I've never been in that situation...” (A50)*

*“It's a bit like when they say, ‘Oh, put yourself in someone else's shoes’. But I can’t because I'm not them. So, unless it's happened to me, I can't do it. It’s as simple as that.” (A23)*

*“I could only draw on my previous experiences. If I had been in that experience before, you know, and it would have to be quite similar. Otherwise, I might be a bit thrown by that sort of question.” (A40)*

A16, a language graduate who was applying for an administrative post at an educational establishment, recounted her bemused reaction to a not uncommon hypothetical question asked by some interviewers:

*“There are those (questions) - I don't know what the purpose of this question is, you know... but questions like, if you were to be an animal, what type of animal would you be? I don't think that's relevant to the job and I don't know how in an administrative setting they would apply that. These are the sort of questions that surprise me because I would have to think about and consider different animals and what their qualities are - I don't have time in an interview.” (A16)*

*“They feel like they’re trying to trick me… I prefer things direct and straight, not ‘What ifs?’ and ‘Supposing… ‘” (A30)*

One participant said that she refused to answer hypothetical questions as they were inappropriate:

*“I refuse to answer them… and certainly in X (a government department) you are not supposed to do them anymore. I will normally turn around and say, ‘Are you talking hypothetically or do you want me to give you an example of what I've done?’ And I've got to the point where I will stop them, whether that's right or wrong... but I do refuse to do hypotheticals. My brain would explode.” (A29)*

### 5.6.5 Visual thinkers may experience particular difficulties with interview questions

Autistic people who are visual thinkers will have additional problems dealing with oral questioning. One participant, a researcher, who described herself as a visual thinker, explained her difficulties in conceptualising what was being asked of her at job interviews. In order to understand, she needed more detailed information to ‘build a picture’ of what was required:

*“I definitely remember things visually****.*** *When I have to learn a process, I wouldn't be able to necessarily tell you verbally what I'm doing, but when I see it, I know what to do... so when they don't explain things and use very general words like ‘operational performance’, that doesn't have a picture... In the end I had to ask them to repeat the question and then I had to ask for more information. And the HR lady kind of guided me to the answer (and) … because I'd got all the pieces of the puzzle, then I knew what she was after so I could answer. And they said that I did really well on that question, but it was only because she had given the extra information.” (A19)*

This participant went on to recount a similar interview experience where she believed the format of the questioning, involving hypothetical scenarios rather than detailed information relating to the task, did not allow her to show her competence; and her hesitant performance was misinterpreted by her interviewer:

*“…it was for a healthcare product and he was asking me how I would go about designing a research study around it. And I couldn't answer the question initially and then he started prompting me and describing what the product looks like, and how it works. And I was starting to get a picture but I needed him to go into more detail about the product and to see people using it, and then I knew I'd be able to give a really good answer, but he hadn't given me that information. They gave me feedback on every question that I'd answered and the ones that I'd got stuck on were the hypothetical questions, and he said to me, ‘I think you're not confident enough’ but it wasn't that I wasn't confident, it was because I needed extra information.” (A19)*

## 5.7 Self-promotion

The literature indicates that autistic people often struggle to ‘sell themselves’ in an interview, even if they have the right skills for the job. A majority of participants related their sense of inadequacy in projecting a confident and positive persona that would create the ‘right impression’. For A50, who had a master’s degree in Economics, it was rooted in the negative feedback she had received from an early age:

*“Autistic people tend to be told from an early age that something is wrong with them and whatever they do, they don't do it the right way. So, when you get to the point when you are actually applying for a job, you have already had so much criticism aimed towards you that it's really difficult to tell them, ‘I’m great’… because I don’t believe I’m great anymore… There’s something called disappointment in a relationship with neurotypicals and autistic people. You know, I meet somebody and within 30 seconds, I can see on their faces they’re disappointed and they turn off. I think people see the difference, you know it's the eye contact, it’s the way we communicate. So, within the first 30 seconds probably they scan me and, ‘Oh this person is different to me and I'm not interested.’ And because we feel like we always disappoint everybody, it's really difficult to then say, ‘Oh, I'm great. I would do this in this job and you are not going to regret recruiting me’… it's psychological, I think - it’s years of disapproval.” (A50)*

Feedback at various times in her career had instilled a sense of ‘otherness’ in A34 and eroded her confidence:

*“I have been told to my face several times over my career: ‘Why can't you just be more like everybody else? What's wrong with you? Why do you have to do things that way?’” (A34)*

Others spoke of their innate lack of confidence and sense that that they did not compare well with other candidates, despite attempts to improve their interview performance:

*“It’s something I feel uncomfortable with (self-promotion). I don't really know what to say, and I think one of my problems at interviews is that I don't know how to sell myself and make myself look attractive when compared to someone else. And I'm thinking there's other people that they're interviewing who've got more experience than me. They're more confident, they're more competent and I don't know how I can compare myself to them and make myself sound attractive. And I come out of it thinking, ‘Well, I didn't really do very well there’ because I just don't know how to persuade them to consider me, and I always think that they soon disregard me. The thing is I've had advice, I've gone on courses, I've looked at websites and I feel I've done all that and it's only effective to some extent… I think what I'm conscious of is that we (autistic people) are not great at self-promotion” (A18)*

*“I find it very difficult to sell myself, you know, or be positive. I think I sometimes think about negative things more and might feel ashamed about my disabilities because I also have dyspraxia and it affects my coordination quite a bit and also sometimes, I'm not sure what my identity is and I kind of feel a bit empty inside. So, it isn't really very easy for me to sell myself. I mean I have to be sure that I can do something, you know, before I can sell myself… I feel that I'm not as good as other people but it’s a disability so I shouldn’t feel like that.” (A40)*

Another participant, a socially articulate individual who was made redundant in his 40s, expressed his frustration at what he saw as the inaccessibility of jobs currently compared to his earlier career, and the need to ‘perform’ in order to secure even lowly-paid work, which often worked against autistic people:

*“When I went into the railway, it was very much a case that you went into the local job centre and they had a little postcard with a maximum of 50 words and you took the card and you went and shook somebody's hand and spoke to them face to face. Then I came out 12 years later, being made redundant and I was finding things like computers now read your CV… even now I really struggle getting the job because I just don't understand the process. It's so alien and foreign to me… the problem is now I can go to be a cleaner, I can go to work in X (coffee shop) and you have to give these absolutely stellar performances, but it’s pure pantomime. And… we (autistics) can't navigate even for the most basic jobs.” (A6)*

This participant went on to highlight what he saw as the artificiality of the questioning, which he viewed as a dishonest ‘pantomime’:

*“In job interviews, they say be honest but being honest is the last thing anyone should be doing. You’re engaged in what’s almost like a pantomime. The interview is asking you questions you can tell they don't believe. It's just some HR person giving this list of questions to ask. So, I'm obliged to give quite stylised answers and I have to pander to these questions. So, they're talking nonsense and I’m talking nonsense. They know it. I know it but it's just a weird interaction that I just really struggle with.” (A6)*

Candidates are often called upon to project themselves not only in a good light but as the ‘best’ person for the job, even though they have no knowledge of the competition, something that autistic people may struggle with. A6 explained his dislike of this form of questioning:

*“One of the classic interview questions that I absolutely hate with a vengeance is when someone says, ‘Tell me why you're the best person for the job.’ Well, I'm clearly not. I'm absolutely convinced you can find a quarter of a million people better suited to this job than me. But right now, you've got limited resources, limited time, limited money, and you have to pick the most likely out of the group of candidates. The question is nonsense, and it makes me so angry and I have to suppress that and have to push that down.” (A6)*

The literature indicates that autistic people are more likely to ‘say it as it is’, giving strictly accurate and direct responses. Consequently, for certain individuals, there was the sense that they did not want to portray an ‘alternative persona’ in order to impress at interview as it would compromise their integrity:

*“I can't really create a different version of myself, which I can just use at interviews. I'm probably a bit more straightforward than that. There isn't really anything particularly fake about anything I do or say in interviews. Sometimes people lie on their CV and things like that, but everything that I put down is completely truthful.” (A9)*

*“I am really bad at selling myself because I can't say things that are not true. It just feels awkward and I think it's cognitively impossible for me to come up with lies about myself because I… think quite little of myself. And so, it just seems completely outlandish to come up with superlatives so other people will be impressed by me.” (A28)*

A12 believed he had to guard against his natural inclination to be ‘honest’ at interviews, as one is expected to present an exceptionally ‘positive’ version of oneself:

*“The difficulty is I can be a bit honest in that department (on self-promotion) and when they get around to asking ’What would you consider your weaknesses?’ I’d be careful not to fall into the pit and dig too deeply. I mean, I want to give a balanced rationale of my work persona but it’s a difficult balancing act between drawing them in and putting them off. I don’t want to put them off too much.” (A12)*

The tension between an applicant’s wish to be ‘honest’ and the accepted ‘self-promotion’ expected at interview was echoed by others:

*“I don't like it when they ask you about something that's gone wrong because I feel I want to be honest and I probably undersell myself because I probably say too much. I'm too honest then.” (A19)*

*“I don't know what they're looking for and I think it's sort of embarrassing as well. Also, a lot of people sort of stretch the truth and I don't want to be doing that.” (A45)*

*“I feel very uncomfortable trying to sell myself, and to put myself in the most positive light is not something that comes very naturally to me. I feel I want to be very honest about my skills and to say when I feel a particular skill that they want is not so strong in me.” (A44)*

Similarly, S2, a trade union representative, expressed the view that autistic applicants are more likely to be candid in their responses at interview:

*“Autistic people answer questions with an honest answer which is one of the strengths of autism but it tends to get you judged negatively at interviews.” (S2)*

A16 questioned the need to articulate and promote their skills and fitness for the post when employers had written evidence of their qualifications and work experience:

*“It does make me feel uncomfortable that I have to sell myself and, in some way, embellish my skills and abilities. If on the CV I've written down the jobs and the tasks that I’ve done, it's fairly clear that I have the skills, if it's a similar job. These are transferable skills… (and) I don't know what else I can say when they ask me a question like this.” (A16)*

Similarly, A27, who was struggling to get appropriate work despite a successful work record, expressed his frustration at the process in which he felt he could not succeed, despite his ability and experience:

*“I know I can do the job. I'm more than qualified. Here's my references, but you're not listening to me. So, I don't know what you're trying to extract from me… I don't know what information you want from me. You're talking in the abstract all the time. Can I do the job? Yeah, here's my qualifications. This is why I get frustrated. Can I do the job? Yeah, I can do the job.” (A27)*

Like the majority of participants, A27 spoke of the need to ‘mask’ or ‘camouflage’ in order to present a persona that would be viewed as neurotypical and therefore more acceptable to the interviewer. Importantly, however, he remarked that as a skilled technician, he would have liked the opportunity to promote his talents and to *“shine"* as an *“autistic”* candidate - but from his experience had found that the ‘face’ of autism was unwelcome to employers:

*“I think one of the biggest issues for me is how you try to mask and camouflage yourself as an individual in trying to fit into the interview and trying to get the job. When the reality is actually supposed to be trying to be yourself, you know, like your skills showing but let who you are as an autistic person shine. But for some reason, that seems to be a disadvantage in… the job interview. And one of the big frustrations, one of the big burnouts for me with the job interviews, is the effect of camouflaging my autism. It… just makes me so uneasy and … so tired… because you tried to fit into their expectations.” (A27)*

By contrast - and exceptionally – A10, who had ‘mild autism’ and was articulate with ‘good’ eye contact, felt confident about the process of projecting a positive persona:

*“I put my best foot forward really… and I think if it's a formal interview, then… you need to sell yourself and show yourself off as much as possible.” (A10)*

Four participants, whilst recognising their own reluctance or inability to project themselves, commented that those who could ‘put on a good show’ were more likely to be offered the job, even if they were not the best candidate:

*“I don’t like to blow my own trumpet. I find it unseemly actually and, of course, the person who can sell themselves the best, regardless of whether they are the best, will baffle the brains. It’s (the interview) something that brings out people’s communication skills rather than anything else.” (A15)*

*“I think it’s something that benefits people with confidence, and confidence doesn't equal competence.” (A52)*

*“I think the standard interview format suits people who are very good at saying that they're good at things and sort of quick to answer things but not necessarily good at doing the actual job.” (A47)*

*“The people who are good at interviews tend to be the ones who are full of b\*\*\*\*\*\*\*. Quite frankly, they're the ones that don't actually get the job done but are more likely to boast about what they do and they seem to sort of skim through, leaving everybody in their wake.” (A29)*

## 5.8 Anxiety

Anxiety affects the ability to perform well at interview and is experienced by many neurotypical, as well as autistic, candidates. For autistic people, however, the literature shows that levels of anxiety tend to be more extreme and, with few exceptions, participants said they experienced high levels of anxiety when attending job interviews. They were particularly affected when, despite their best efforts to prepare for the occasion, the unexpected occurred. S5, a labour market intermediary, explained:

*“I've been working with autistic people for the best part of 40 years and nearly all autistic behaviour, whether it's conscious or unconscious, has the overall goal of reducing anxiety. And a lot of that anxiety comes from uncertainty and ambiguity. So, if you can take as much of those out of whatever process you're looking at, then it's helpful.” (S5)*

Anxiety might occur at each stage of the process: in the days before when preparing for the interview, during the process, and post-interview when many participants experienced a sense of exhaustion. In the days leading up to the interview, they often engaged in detailed preparation to allay their apprehension. While many neurotypical people will also experience nerves before a job interview, for autistic people it is heightened by the need to master certain social skills and neurotypical behaviours that do not come naturally to them. One woman likened it to an actor preparing to go on stage:

*“It's absolutely exhausting. I don't sleep for days before. Every night I lie awake thinking, ‘What shall I say? Make sure I do this. Make sure I smile a lot’, all this kind of programming and tuning myself in and building myself up to it. Because it just feels like going on stage. It feels like being an actor to me, like I've got to… give a performance… It’s just a list of things I must remember: don't sit like this; don't do that; don't look at the floor; look at them.” (A51)*

Others also were anxious in the lead-up to the interview:

*“There's a lot of questions that you have to think about ahead of time, never mind just the normal interview. You've got to think about where you're going; and what it's going to look like, and who you're speaking to first when actually, most people don't really stress over that kind of stuff… whereas for us ASDs it's a bit more looking at all the sensory stuff as… there's a lot of times you just don't know where to go, because it's not an obvious thing, is it? You know, is it this door? Is it this way? Do I ask these people? It's really hard.” (A23)*

*“I get a lot of anxiety, leading up to it and preparing. For me, it's knowing how much to prepare because I know I'm going to find it difficult to give the examples and to think and speak, so I never feel like I'm prepared enough. But then I find preparing for interviews quite hard. Like I do so much work, I'll spend hours and hours. And I'm not sure how much I'm supposed to do. But I find that really exhausting.” (A42)*

*“...I made a booklet of all the questions that they could ask and… also practise scripts.” (A25)*

*“My way of preparing for interviews is to make answers to every single question they might be able to ask me. So, as long as I can sort of fit it in, with one of those questions then I'm alright. If I can't see the connection, then I panic and don't know what to say.” (A47)*

Like many, A19 remarked that knowing how the recruitment process and interview would be conducted would help reduce her stress levels:

*“I guess I like to know the details of things so it's like knowing what the process is when you apply, knowing you'll hear back within a month or… when you have the interview, knowing where it is and like how many people are going to interview you.” (A19)*

A common source of anxiety for participants was a surprising lack of clear instructions on where the interview was being held. Further uncertainty occurred in some cases when, on arriving at the interview location, applicants found there was no-one to meet them, or no obvious reception area where they could report their arrival:

*“I need to be given a map so I know where I'm going and then it needs to match what I see.” (A33)*

*“There’s a problem sometimes... actually finding where they are in the building. They don't always tell you where the interview is taking place. Sometimes you’ve got to go in and ask at a trade counter if it’s a wholesaler, to ask for the people you need to see. They don't send the instructions… you have to find out… so I always turn up very early (to avoid getting stressed).” (A7)*

One participant, who was attending a job interview in a supermarket, recalled:

*“I have found it very stressful when they tell you to turn up at a certain time and you go in and you can't find the person, and they're not really expecting you. You've got to hang around for 10-15 minutes until they're ready to see you… I think anybody would find that stressful but I found that particularly stressful because I don't know what to do with that time… sometimes I'll turn up and. you just have to join the queue like a normal customer, even though it's quite obvious you’re there for an interview. So even if I've allowed plenty of time, if there's a long queue sometimes that can then cause me to be late. When I get to the front of the queue quite often you manage to find somebody who just says, ‘Stand there’, and go to get them. Sometimes that will happen quite quickly, other times I’ve been waiting 10-15 minutes. I'm kind of standing like a lemon in front of the shop assistant on the till.” (A10)*

Others gave similar accounts of the stress of both finding a venue and then not being expected:

*“Every single time I've done an interview it’s been in a location I've not been to before. So, you've got the extra stress of trying to find the right place at the right time, make sure that you are met by the right person. I've had occasions where I've turned up, and no one came to collect me at the door. People think of the stress of the interview, it's not just that, it's the stress of getting there. It's the stress of being at an unfamiliar place at a set time for a set period of time and so frazzled by the time you turn up that you just go, I may as well just walk out now, what's the point of me putting myself through this s\*\*\* again just to be told ‘Oh, you're really bad at interviews. Why don't you take a course or why don't you do something about it?’” (A29)*

In a number of cases the impact on the individual was physical. A50, an Economics graduate, explained:

*“I've got a general anxiety of talking. No matter how comfortable I feel, I’m still anxious and I'm sweating… it's almost like I put so much energy and effort into talking… so in general talking makes me anxious, following a train of thought, basically, and to come from one point to where I want to get to takes so much energy for me that I literally sweat and I get tired after.” (A50)*

Others had similar experiences:

*“I literally shake my leg underneath the table to stop myself looking so nervous. Because that's like a coping mechanism for me to stop my face from looking really overwhelmed and nervous because… if the person says something to me and I have the wrong facial expression on, they take that really personally.” (A24)*

*“I drink water (at interviews) … for pauses because I can talk really fast so I use water to control how fast I'm speaking. But (at one interview) … I was quite shaky and everything with the amount of anxiety and adrenaline running through that when I drank my water, it was just shaking, and they asked if I needed a break.” (A25)*

Generally, participants were exhausted by the interview process and needed time to recover, as explained by the following participants:

*“I get exhausted from just the simple fact that I've interacted with another person. It doesn't matter how much or how little. After this (the research interview), I'm probably going to lie down for a bit. It's just a given that I'm going to be tired after seeing people.” (A28)*

*“I will come home and have to sleep for about 14 hours.” (A10)*

*“I’ve felt really ill every interview I've been to. It's not just being face to face. It really makes me ill, like, for like two or three days. I literally can't function, it’s like a total shutdown.” (A33)*

*“When I think about past interviews that I've had where I've had to go somewhere, I've sort of spent 24 hours beforehand, building myself up to it. and then, feeling very, very worked up before the interview, and the …you get into the interview and (the) adrenaline keeps going and you've got to try and give all the right answers and big yourself up and be amazing. And then afterwards, you just get this crash. And I've often found that after an interview it’s taken me two days to get over it.” (A36)*

A16, a languages graduate, gave an account of her experience of the interview process, which she likened to an examination, where the combination of sensory issues, the need to conform to certain behavioural norms, as well as respond appropriately to the questioning, combined to raise her anxiety levels and left her exhausted:

*“Going to an interview where you've been preparing for it, it's like going into an exam. You’ve to think of all you need to say, plus all the checklist of keeping eye contact, make sure you shake their hands… and it builds up to the point that it is very exhausting. I have no energy...for the rest of the day. I'm sort of like mentally, emotionally but also physically exhausted because I am so tense … A lot of the time it's the sensory overload from the environment...in the room, the lighting, the noise … I feel almost bruised physically from the experience.” (A16)*

## 5.9 Possible alternatives to the conventional interview for assessing the competencies of autistic job applicants

Paragraphs **5.1** to 5**.8** above relate the challenges that autistic people experience when undergoing the conventional job interview. For the majority of participants, it is an ordeal that tests their performance in a skill set in which, by the very nature of their disability, they feel disadvantaged and are unlikely to acquit themselves well. One employment mentor remarked:

*“The interview is putting immense pressure on people on the autistic spectrum and that's why we really should be offering alternatives to do things like job tasters to come in and do the tasks, and show them the environment.” (S4)*

This view was echoed by autistic participants who believed that the job interview focus on social communication and behaviour does not in most cases assess the specific requirements of the post, and therefore does not allow the autistic person to demonstrate the actual competencies needed to perform the job. To ascertain a potentially more appropriate and effective way of evaluating their suitability to a particular post, participants were asked for their views on alternative assessment methods such as job-based tasks and work trials.

### 5.9.1. Job-based tasks as a means of assessment

Job-based tasks are activities that mirror the work that applicants would be required to perform in the day-to-day job. They are used as a form of assessment in a variety of industries but are found most commonly in jobs of a technical or practical nature such as data manipulation and coding, equipment operation or retail tasks. In general, they range from a computer-based task of less than an hour to a few hours on the shop floor, and typically are no longer than half a day. The vast majority of the participants who had experienced these forms of assessment preferred them to the traditional interview as they were more confident in demonstrating the specific skills relevant to the job than the social and communication skills tested in the conventional interview:

*“I love those sorts of tasks. I love those sorts of interviews where you are just left to get on… with the actual work. I think that's where autistics can excel by showing their skills rather than talking about them.” (A6)*

 *“…I have found when they've given me a specific task and presentation that I've known before, I can get really into it and I feel like that shows. And then it's nice when they give you a scenario about it before, and you can research it and then you can have a discussion with them like you would do at work. I like that idea more than saying how would you react in this scenario because I’m a really visual, literal thinker so unless I've actually been in that scenario, sometimes that can be quite difficult.” (A19)*

*“So, like the council where I had to do an admin task on the computer for 10 minutes. Yeah, I really like those types of (interviews)… because it's demonstrating what you can do rather than how you look, and what you talk about. You know, ‘Can you actually do what we want you to do day-to-day?’” (A10)*

A42, who had worked in the criminal justice system, noted that her last interview might have been more instructive if it had relied more on a task-based assessment.

*“In the last interview I had, which was for a research assistant post, I just thought, ‘Why didn't they just give us all an assessment, a thematic analysis and then they could have looked at what we produced rather than asking lots of questions?’” (A42)*

Four participants said they had succeeded in gaining employment by this method. A16, who had worked in university administration, explained how performing a precise job task enabled her to focus and demonstrate her job-related skills:

*“…it was a fairly simple task just working with Outlook… and I thought that was quite a different way of assessing skills, I felt calmer doing it because it was just me. It wasn't like I had to give an on-the-spot answer. I had a time limit like 15 minutes to complete the task. Once I'm given a task, I can fully engage with it and so I calmed down because I was focusing on what I had to do. There were none of all these other things that were interfering like that checklist about keeping eye contact and responding in a certain way … and I thought that was quite good and I think that would be a good (form of assessment).” (A16)*

*“When I got recruited into my company, they did all sorts of tests and, of course, I passed very well, all of them. So, the interview was a really minor part of the recruitment process. It's almost like they made a decision on the points I achieved on all the tests… I'd rather do tests; I'd rather do trials of what we’re going to do.” (A50)*

*“The reason that I succeeded… was because it wasn't just a straightforward interview. It was a clear brief of five elements that everyone had to go through that was scored. So, it wasn't a couple of interviews or a panel interview… it was a very clear set of guidelines about what you needed to do, when they would happen and what the success criteria would be.” (A18)*

Similarly, S2, a trade union representative, observed that a practical assessment for some jobs - such as a train driver - was more appropriate for autistic applicants than written examinations:

*“They’re still making them sit exams. That’s the problem… they have simulators in the depot that they use to train people who are already in work. It would not be hard to set that simulator up to do an assessment for someone who would be better assessed in a practical environment than in an exam.” (S2)*

One participant commented that the only way he could secure a job was by gaining a good reputation through self-employed work, as he was unsuccessful in his attempts through the traditional channels:

*“The jobs I've got were purely based on my skills... I've helped someone, then someone else has heard … and it’s just opened more doors for me… I've given up trying to go up against a company with a HR department … the truth is I’m a handy person to know, but if I went for the job via a formal interview, I wouldn't get it… I would love to go work, for example, where I could be a serious part of that company but … the door is always closed sadly. And it's the interviewing process…” (A27)*

Even where participants were not successful in being offered the job for which they had applied, there was a sense of fairness and satisfaction that they had been given an opportunity to show their ability to do the job rather than rely exclusively on the traditional interview. A4 described the assessment she underwent for a teaching post where she was given clear details of the assessment process that included performing some of the tasks in the job description:

*“…I didn’t get (the job) and the feedback was lack of experience but from the point of view of the interview, it was the best-planned and neurodiverse-welcoming interview in that they wrote to me telling me exactly what the programme was going to be, and there were three sections... an interview with the head and assistant head, a task marking a pupil’s paper (using their system of marking) and a lesson. I knew in advance what was planned and didn’t feel I was being judged on the interview alone… I came out not feeling absolutely dreadful and, even though when I got the phone call and it was negative, I didn’t feel it had gone the same way as other interviews went with me... I was hopeful.” (A4)*

It was important, however, that such assessments were arranged in advance so that applicants were prepared and did not feel exploited:

*“I have had interviews, one at (a supermarket chain) where they've asked, ‘Can you go on the shop floor for half an hour and work with my colleague in drinks, do a bit of that?’ Four hours later you're still there… I was expecting to go around to my Gran’s to have afternoon tea a couple of hours later … I was being exploited. Nobody was checking if I could do the job, the manager had gone and, in the end, I had to leave ” (A10)*

For A15, however, the unfamiliarity of the task was an obstacle, and in her view did not allow her to demonstrate her general ability in that field of work:

*“I applied to be a librarian and was given a task of an hour in a room to itemise some resources using a computer... and I didn’t pass that, despite really wanting the job and probably being very good at it because that particular task I had never done before.” (A15)*

For A11, a designer, there was sometimes a lack of clarity in what he was expected to achieve in the assignments:

*“Some of the time I don’t know what they're looking for. For example, I went for a kind of Christmas decoration company, and another one was for a dental model making thing, and they asked me to go and make something and I tried my best to make it perfectly. But I don't know whether they're looking for speed or if they're looking for quality, or a bit of both, because they don't actually state that, you know. If I know they're looking for speed then I can try and gear more towards that. Or are they looking for perfection? The problem is I generally don't know quite what somebody's looking for.” (A11)*

Similarly, others found the testing stressful as they were required to perform unfamiliar tasks within strict time limits:

*“I found that I took longer than they expected me to in completing the tasks which made me feel a little bit uncomfortable. (For) one of them I had to type out a document … and then there were other ones where I had to compose an email... and ones where I had to look at some figures and analyse them, maybe add them up, maybe work out which ones were relevant and which ones weren't. That sort of thing… I found that quite stressful” (A18)*

### 5.9.2 Work trials

Work trials are a more extended form of appraisal where employers have an opportunity to observe potential employees in the workplace, and assess how they manage their day-to-day responsibilities and cope with the work environment. Such trials may be paid or voluntary, and typically last between a week to several months.

For the vast majority of participants, this form of assessment was viewed as a better method for both employer and applicant to assess their long-term suitability to a post:

*“I'm all in favour of having other ways of assessing people, like work trials or work experience… Just doing an interview in isolation I wouldn't necessarily come across that well. So, someone who's not autistic… would come across a lot better than me. So, I feel like I would need an opportunity to do something a bit more practical to demonstrate what I can do rather than just ‘talking the talk.’” (A9)*

*“I think it's a great idea and it makes it more of an interview, rather than a view, and because I think there's not much two-way stuff going on. So, I think if you were able to get at least a day in the environment … you would be able to see whether it is the job that's been advertised, whether it is the culture that's been spoken of and then you would know a bit better. And I think it would be good for the employer as well to be able to see how people get on when they're on task and in training.” (A34)*

 *“I really do like the idea of work trials.” (A51)*

*“A work trial - I think it could very well be the key for autism. Having a go at the work.” (A41)*

Three participants commented that it was a much fairer way of assessing autistic people:

*“That’s a much more equitable way to test out somebody’s suitability to a job.” (A22)*

*“(That’s) much better because the interview is so fake and everyone's lying anyway, so it's sort of fair just to see what you can actually do, not what you say you can do, and better for an autistic person. I think we would do better out of it than say neurotypicals. They might do worse because they big themselves up so much.” (A33)*

*“Interviews aren't supposed to be a game where you're trying to catch someone out. They are supposed to be genuinely finding if someone would be good at the job.” (A37)*

Particularly in specialist work, participants said they would welcome a chance to demonstrate their aptitude, rather than engage in conversation:

*“It would be ideal if I could just go there… you know for a month, or however long, a week, whatever, and they put you to work… with a supervisor who would say, ‘Show us your skills’, and then you could demonstrate them and then they'd give me the job. That would be the dream situation…” (A13)*

Three participants who were now in employment said that a form of work trial, whether through voluntary work or an internship, had been the means by which they had been able to enter the job market:

*“I guess I have got jobs in that style because several of my jobs, the job I had and the one I'm doing now with the organisation… have been because I’d already been there. Like the (company) I volunteered for, they said, ‘Actually, we really like what you're doing and they started paying me so that has actually worked.’” (A19)*

*“I started off as a volunteer in one team and I did the job so quickly that the manager seemed a bit embarrassed. He said, ‘I was expecting you to be at it for months and you've done it in two weeks... You're obviously very capable’. And he knew of another team in the (organisation)… so, I went to this other team and… picked everything up very quickly and, as the team grew, I went from volunteer to two days a week to full-time.” (A32)*

*“I experienced a work trial delivering X. (It) involved working… for two weeks. That went really, really well. I was able to learn on the job and assimilate. Whatever job I’ve ever done, it takes me time to settle into it but once I’m settled, I’m really settled. I had an interview following that but by then I had already demonstrated that I could do it and wanted the job by applying for the interview.” (A15)*

Despite a high IQ, A13 left school without qualifications and struggled to find employment. He was subsequently given the opportunity through an assisted employment scheme of a trial period in a laboratory, which he found far preferable to the traditional interviews that he had experienced:

*“(Work trials are) spot on, allowing people to demonstrate their practical skills. It's not a popularity contest at the end of the day. You're looking for someone who's able to perform and, if the autistic person in question is good and competent, then it doesn't matter how nice they are at the Christmas party… as long as they're good at their job. That's what I prefer to being interviewed, instead of all that smiling and being sociable and merry. Does that really matter as long as I'm able to produce a good bit of work, which I am? And… so that was good because I thought I was able to do it and then they took me on.” (A13)*

Similarly, A9, a trainee accountant, received mentorship through an autism support group and gained work experience at the company where subsequently he was offered full-time employment:

*“I had two weeks’ work experience at the company. By the time of the interview, I already knew two of the three interview panels. I wouldn't say that I was guaranteed that position but I had a distinct advantage in that they knew who I was and already to some extent what I could do.” (A9)*

One participant who was successful in getting interviews but received no job offers, also saw work trials as an opportunity:

*“I probably get 90% to 95% of interviews from the application but then (don’t get the job)* ***…*** *I think that's a really good way of getting to know the place and them getting to know you, and working out whether it will work. And you can prove yourself.” (A47)*

A12, a graduate, who had not yet succeeded in obtaining regular or full-time employment, took a similar view. He believed work trials and job-based tasks would enable him to show his skills in his chosen field:

*“(They) would really show them what I'm capable of – that would be my first choice but job-based tasks would be my second choice. I mean the vast majority of (these) roles will require practical skills, which is difficult to demonstrate in interviews.” (A12)*

Participants such as A15 and A11 commented on how work trials would give them time to settle into the job and present a more favourable impression than they were able to within the constraints of the interview:

*“I think (it) would be excellent and something where I would excel. In a normal interview I would be the one least likely to be chosen because of my communication processing difficulties on the spot. In a work trial I would shine and become the person they would start to look at and notice. That would definitely be in my favour and I think I would surpass expectations because if it’s a task you are enjoying and with the singularity of mind, then you’re just going to go for it and get involved and that really shows.” (A15)*

*“…also, the other thing with that (work trials) is it's not one screw up and you’re toast. You get to have a chance of fixing the problems or doing various things. So, anything like that is definitely better.” (A11)*

For A18, the work trial was seen as an opportunity not only to demonstrate competencies but to present their ‘true character’ in the workplace, compared with the anxious performance at the job interview:

*“I think it would give me the opportunity to show my character more, and I think I'd feel more relaxed and I could get to know the other staff a little bit better so I could interact with them a bit more and sort of feel more at ease with them… I could comment on the work that I'm doing and maybe talk to other people and listen to them. I mean there might be some humour in the office and I could join in that maybe, or laugh along to a joke...” (A18)*

### 5.9.3 Work trials are more likely to lead to sustained employment

An important aspect of the work trial is its capacity to assess the likely sustainability of employment where prospective employees would have a clearer idea not only of what the job entailed but also of the working environment and social interactions that could prove critical in their decision to remain in employment. Equally, A30 and A17 saw this method of assessment as an opportunity for both sides to assess how suitable an appointment might be:

*“I think that would be a good idea so both myself and the employer could see if the job… and environment are suited to me. I have tried work and found it was not to my liking and been unable to sustain it.” (A30)*

*“That seems like a good idea, one where you can trial the job and see what it's like but also a chance to show how you would fit in with their organisation.” (A17)*

A42 suggested that employers and fellow workers might need time to ‘adjust’ to an autistic employee:

*“It may be that it takes a while to be comfortable with them (autistic people).” (A42)*

Six participants who had found employment following an interview recalled that once they had started, unexpectedly they had come up against aspects of the working environment that had ultimately led to their resignation. A10, for example, explained how the lunch break arrangement at his place of employment was one of the factors in his decision to leave:

*“I was with them for about a year and I gave up because I struggled with the autism. I was unable to go into the lunchtime cafeteria for staff. It was full of people and I just found it too overwhelming to open the door and just go in. So, I was never eating any lunch… and there was nowhere else to eat it.” (A10)*

A28, a young graduate, had similar concerns about sensory issues:

*“(Work trials) would help you get a sense of what the sensory environment is like because imagine if a couple of days into the job, you broke down because of some kind of noise that you didn't anticipate, or because the cafeteria smelled so strongly that you can't sit in it. I'm extremely sensitive to sensory (issues) because it's not just about what you deliver, but also about how the job itself makes you feel and whether these sensory aspects of the job affect your delivery…” (A28)*

The sense of ‘not belonging’ in a particular organisation was sometimes influenced by the pressure to conform to certain social aspects of office life that were only apparent after starting a job. A work trial, on the other hand, would allow them an opportunity both to familiarise themselves with the nature of the work and to discover their compatibility with colleagues:

*“I’ve worked in places where it's been, ‘But we always have a barbecue and the ping pong table at twelve o'clock’ and I'm like, I don't want to, I want to eat my sandwich in peace with a book. But it’s like, ‘No, no, you've got to enjoy what we do.’… so, yeah, it's very much factoring in how social you need to be at work because sometimes doing the actual job is not a problem but it's all the chit chat and social expectation that goes with it. That can sometimes tip you over the edge.” (A36)*

*“I have once or twice been a bit surprised when I passed an interview, and in two or three weeks something's been said and you suddenly become aware that there's this massive undercurrent and problem within your organisation. And … certainly, particular individuals that you would be working with and reporting to … (you could assess), whether they're … on the same kind of wavelength (with a work trial).” (A38)*

Others related how they were able to give a ‘performance’ for the purposes of the interview but could not sustain it long-term. A16 explained that the traditional interview encouraged a ‘performance’ which she felt was not true to her real personality; and the pressure of continuing this act would often affect her mental health to the point where she felt obliged to leave. A work trial, on the other hand, would allow her to assimilate the work and the operational environment at a more measured pace, where both employer and employee could assess the suitability of the post:

*“Going to an interview is putting on a performance but I'm not sure that a lot of people realise that for people on the spectrum like me, who have Asperger's and … with women we do a lot of ‘masking’ … It's not like we just prepare for the interview in that character. We have to keep that character going for as long as we work in that job and… that's very, very draining. I guess maybe that's why I've had several jobs because I get to a point where I can't hold it up anymore … and it triggers other things and then I have to move on to something else … So yes, the work trial… I think that’s a really good idea... (it) would give everybody the option to just accept the… autistic person as they are without the need to put on a performance.” (A16)*

S4, a professional mentor who supported autistic job seekers and those in the workplace, confirmed the long-term problems of ‘masking’:

*“You get a lot of problems further down the line, people can't sustain that ‘masking’ and ultimately, it's burnout or they can't filter those behaviours. And that is when you get anger problems or meltdown or shut downs in the workplace as extremes, or just anxiety gets so high. So, it is not sustainable.” (S4)*

### 5.9.4 Autistic people may feel trapped in unsuitable employment because of concerns about future interviews

The initial aim of the research was to examine the influences of impression management, stereotyping and person-job/person-organisation fit on the selection of autistic applicants seeking to enter the job market. As the research progressed, however, it was clear that for some who were in employment, the job interview continued to be a barrier since promotion or alternative jobs depended on success in the same process which had presented such difficulties for them in the first place.

Five participants spoke of being ‘trapped’ in their current job. Most had struggled to get work, and often had achieved it through methods less reliant on the conventional interview, such as a period of voluntary work or task-based assessments. Now in middle-age or older, and over-qualified for their current position, they were ready to progress but viewed the job interview as an insurmountable obstacle. A32, whose qualifications included a PhD and MBA, had been unable to advance beyond his junior position in customer support:

*“I’m so frightened of interviews, you know, that once I've got a job I'll try and keep it as long as I can. That's why I've only had three jobs, none of which required an interview. You see, I can't. I fail interviews all the time… I have never succeeded in an interview.” (A32)*

A50, who has a master’s degree in economics, explained that she appeared to impress potential employers with her qualifications but ‘disappointed’ at interviews, and had reconciled herself to remaining in the post for which she was overqualified:

*“I hate my job. I've been sticking to it for ages because I don't want to go through that (interview) process again... I had one particular interview, which was very disappointing for me. They welcomed me with, like, ‘Oh my God, you are the one, with your CV we are so impressed and we really want to employ you.’ And they explained, ‘We do the interview but that's just a formality’ and (then) they will show me where I'm going to work. And we sat down for the interview and within about 10 minutes of talking with, you know, the usual question about ‘What would you do if?’ I was awfully nervous… and I saw this man sitting down going further and further back, and his face went from a smile into some sort of a shock. And I knew that I wasn't going to get the job and at the end, he was like, ‘Well, shall we bother looking around the office?’ That was an experience that stayed with me for a long, long time. I still remember it and I still know I could have done a really good job there but I was so nervous.” (A50)*

Another participant, who had several degrees including a PhD, was similarly unsuccessful in moving forward in her career, despite considerable efforts to improve her interview technique:

*“I have literally been stuck… I would have interview after interview. And when I finally realised that I had autism, that at least made some sense to me, because I've done everything. I've done training. I even had a three-day course on how to pass an interview. I still couldn't do it. I've got a PhD; I've got five degrees. I've got huge amounts of experience, and I'm just sat there going, what is physically wrong with my brain that I can't do this?... I would apply for jobs where either no one else would apply … or where there were lots available in the hope that I squeaked over. I had to be that strategic… I've got records of literally several hundred interviews that I have done and I didn't get through… and they always turn around and say, ‘Well, we had such high hopes for you from the paper application.’''(A29)*

The vast majority of participants welcomed the idea of work trials as a fairer means of assessing an autistic candidate’s suitability to a job from the perspective of both applicant and employer. Five participants, however, questioned the financial implications of such an arrangement and were concerned that it might be exploited by some employers:

*“I think it's a good idea… but it should not be a vehicle by which the employer takes advantage of these individuals.” (A27)*

Other participants questioned the ethics of working without pay (although unlikely) for a private employer. One spoke of *“possible abuse of free labour with an unscrupulous employer”* (A15), and another:

*“I think a work trial would be helpful… but I would have a problem with doing an unpaid placement in a private company. But if it’s for a worthy cause… It depends on the setup. I have done voluntary work in schools.” (A4)*

Regarding the financial practicalities of work trials, younger participants appeared less concerned about whether the posts were unpaid initially, focusing on the long-term prospects:

*“…the unpaid part personally for me I don't think would matter because you would be getting a job at the end of the day, and if it's unpaid and you're on benefits, you still continue to get your benefits through those couple of weeks.” (A10)*

 For A6, however, who was in his forties, any work trial would have to be paid:

*“The problem is just the real world and I for one could not work without getting a full-time wage.” (A6)*

Two participants raised concerns about the possibility of being too closely monitored, which would put pressure on them:

*“That could quite overwhelm someone because they feel like the employer is watching over them and that can pressure someone more.” (A24)*

*“…the idea of being watched for a long period of time and expecting people in the workplace to watch what I'm doing… no, I don't want someone sitting watching how I work or anything.” (A49)*

The vast majority of participants, however, were in favour of work trials, and labour market intermediaries viewed them as the best means of assessing autistic people, with a strong preference for paid placements:

*“The work trial is the gold standard, it's the ideal. If you can get that, then that's great. And we will always argue for a paid work trial, just because unpaid ones are borderline exploitative. Normally the work trial would be two, three weeks, maybe and that's what we recommend in practical terms.” (S5)*

Similarly, S4, an employment mentor, believed work trials were the path to sustained employment, whilst recognising some practical issues in certain roles:

*“I think that (a work trial) creates long term success as even if you get through an interview, if it's not representative of the work or how they need to be at work, and whether they can sustain that, then that's a huge expense and loss for the organisation, as well as heart-breaking for the individual … so work trials (are better) if an organisation is looking at the bigger picture and … definitely wants to encourage people with neurodiverse conditions…But it depends very much on the role … there may be health and safety issues, you can't get people into places unless they've had some training.” (S4)*

Finally, two participants reflected on the need for change in how autistic people were assessed for jobs, and how work trials could give them the opportunity that was denied to most at present:

*“We need a different approach to enter the job market and plenty of encouragement. Many autistics have great potential within the workplace but are discouraged at the first hurdle due to the inherent communication process that is a job application. The neurotypical interview favours confidence and quick responses to multiple questions. The best candidate for the job may be unable to demonstrate these qualities, especially under pressure. Job interviews reward strong communication skills.” (A15)*

Despite a high IQ, A13 had left school without qualifications. There followed a period of low-paid work and unemployment before he was supported into a successful work trial resulting in an offer of full-time work: From there he had gone on to university and was soon to graduate in a specialist subject:

*“If that (the traditional interview) could change it would improve a lot of people on the spectrum's chance of a job. You've got a lot of people with potential… that could be contributing to society. They just need to be helped out, especially the ones of above or average intelligence could be working in an ordinary workplace, with just a bit of understanding. And then God knows how many hundreds of thousands of people would be off benefits and working. It can only be a good thing. Being on the dole just makes you feel useless.” (A13)*

## 5.10 Summary

This chapter provides an overview of the data collected from autistic participants in relation to their experience of job interviews, with specific reference to ‘impression management’. It also draws on discussions with certain stakeholders who had professional experience of coaching and supporting autistic candidates into employment. The findings indicate that autistic candidates had a good understanding of the need to create a ‘good impression’ at job interviews but were often disadvantaged by innate autistic traits that impacted on their ability to adopt the conventional behaviours expected by employers. These related to both verbal behaviour (fluency of speech, tone of voice and responsiveness to the interviewer) and to non-verbal behaviour (firm handshake, eye contact, good posture and positive facial expressions).

As part of their ‘impression management’, autistic candidates mostly did not disclose their condition at the application stage, in the belief that it would reduce the number of interviews they received. The supposition that disclosure led to fewer interviews was suggested by Ameri *et al.* (2018), based on applications containing fictional data, and was confirmed in this study using empirical data from autistic participants and professional stakeholders. Similarly, many autistic applicants chose not to ask for ‘reasonable adjustments’, as they were concerned that it would raise a ‘red flag’ to employers. Others had a poor understanding of what such adjustments entailed, or expressed doubts as to whether the conventional interview could be adapted to accommodate their needs. Where participants did request adjustments, the response from employers was mixed. The most frequent request was to receive interview questions in advance in order to address difficulties with auditory processing and executive functioning, but this was sometimes refused on the grounds that it would disadvantage other candidates.

A number of participants found that the interview setting inhibited their ability to perform well, particularly where there was a lack of privacy or sensory problems. For some, the conduct of the interview, whether formal or informal, was important in reducing their anxiety, with the vast majority finding a formal set-up, such as a quiet office with table and chairs, most conducive to performing well. Alongside the problem of literal interpretation, autistic job applicants struggled with hypothetical questions that required them to deal with abstract concepts or describe situations outside their personal experience.

Participants often struggled to ‘sell themselves’ in an interview, even if they had the right skills for the job. For some it was rooted in the negative feedback they had received from an early age that had instilled a sense of ‘otherness’. For others, there was the perception that ‘self-promotion’ was akin to deception, and to portray an ‘idealised’ image of themselves in order to impress at interview would compromise their integrity. Participants and stakeholders viewed the conventional job interview as neither fair nor effective in assessing autistic people’s ability to do a job. Their overwhelming preference was for a form of assessment that would focus more on testing the skills that would be needed for the job – such as a work trial – rather than the social skills expected in a conventional interview. In this way, both applicant and employer were more likely to reach a better judgement about the sustainability of their employment. Finally, the conventional interview format remained a barrier for some participants throughout their working life, ‘trapped’ in unsuitable employment because they could not countenance another job interview.

# Chapter 6: Findings (2) Stereotyping, Person-Job Fit and Person-Organisation Fit

## 6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter considered the issues that may impact on the autistic applicant’s ability to create a ‘positive impression’ at job interviews. This second chapter on findings examines stereotyping, person-job fit (P-J fit) and person-organisation fit (P-O fit) which may also affect the autistic candidate’s possibility of being hired.

Stereotyping is the generalisation of a group of people to whom we attribute a defined set of characteristics, either positive or negative (Lippmann, 1922). Typically, people form an impression of others based on little or no personal experience of them, influenced possibly by the media or by limited association with other members of that group (Lippmann, 1922). Closely aligned with stereotyping - particularly in the area of employment - are the theories of P-J fit and P-O fit (Kinnicki *et al.*, 1990; Kristof, 1996)). In the case of the former, employers place more emphasis on the match between a job applicant’s skills and abilities and the requirements of a specific job; in the case of the latter, greater consideration is given to the compatibility of an individual with the culture and values of an organisation (Kinnicki *et al.*, 1990; Kristof, 1996). Stereotyping, P-J fit and P-O fit are of particular relevance when studying autistic job applicants as the portrayal of autism - most notably in the media - has given rise to the notion of a certain ‘type’ of individual with specific characteristics who is likely to perform strongly in the STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), and is therefore particularly suited to employment in information technology and science. However, whilst some autistic people may indeed show ability in these disciplines, others will not, and may perform better in, for example, the arts or creative industries. Stereotyping could therefore lead to unrealistic expectations of some, and a failure to recognise the potential of others, with implications for P-J and P-O fit.

To investigate this part of the research, autistic participants were asked to recount any experiences of stereotyping by employers, and the degree to which they (the applicants) focused on the nature of the job (P-J) fit or the culture of the organisation (P-O) fit when applying for jobs. In addition, employers were asked for their views and experiences in relation to autistic job applicants, and the extent to which such opinions and experiences might influence their decision to hire an autistic candidate. As before, interviewees are coded numerically as follows: autistic participants (A1-52), employers (E1-8) and stakeholders (S1-9).

## 6.2 Autistic participants’ experiences of stereotyping

Autistic participants had experienced a variety of forms of stereotyping. Assumptions and comments made by some employers related to their intelligence, behavioural profile and validity of diagnosis. As will be shown below, these assumptions may have been influenced by the media, previous interactions with an autistic person or their acquired understanding of the condition.

### 6.2.1 Employers confused autism with learning disability or poor physical or mental health

Autism is not a learning disability. Nor is it a physical or mental health condition. However, autistic participants found that some employers assumed that they lacked the mental or physical capacity to discharge their duties independently. A12, a science graduate with relevant work experience in England and abroad, was rejected for a voluntary position for these reasons:

*“Some (employers) have very negative preconceptions… Unfortunately, the interviewer was not willing to give me a chance as he assumed everyone on the spectrum required full-time support. He only would allow me there if I brought in a support worker to supervise me. He did not give me the opportunity to show him examples of my university work or talk about my previous work experience. I mean he was treating me like I was maybe physically disabled or mentally challenged. That's what I felt like.” (A12)*

Many shared a sense of frustration at the lack of differentiation between autism and learning disability that they had experienced in the workplace or when applying for jobs:

*“We’re individuals… but they (employers) don’t distinguish between learning disability and autism.” (A7)*

*“I’ve got an IQ of 133. I haven’t got a learning disability.” (A13)*

*“They think of this stereotypical type of person with autism - someone walking back and forth or not speaking. But they don't really think of a person with autism who's very able but might need some help and a little bit of guidance. They don't.” (A24)*

*“There's actually a major difference between autism and learning difficulty… that we have to explain to some people sometimes.” (A27)*

Four participants either directly or indirectly alluded to ‘Rain Man’, the 1980s American film that portrayed an autistic savant who had an exceptional memory but in all other respects was reliant on others for his daily needs:

*“They (employers) expect Rain Man.” (A29)*

Their experience of employers questioning their ability to perform the full range of duties required by the job, or their perception that employers *would* do this, was recounted by many participants:

*“(They think) that you're learning disabled, and that you're stupid and… I don't really know what people think actually but that you just can't cope and that you maybe won’t be a good employee.” (A33)*

Similarly, A15, who held a master’s degree and had several years’ experience of working in a special school, believed that her employer had reservations about allocating her certain duties appropriate to her grade, due to her autism:

*“I get the feeling that they wonder if I’m capable of delivering medicines. I don’t think they want to trust me around anything as important as that.” (A15)*

Even where learning disability was not seen as the barrier to employment, autistic research participants explained how some employers were concerned that autism would impact on their ability to do the job. At one job interview, for example, A43 was questioned (contrary to employment law) on her ability to perform the job description, given her disclosure of autism:

*“I had employers where I've … disclosed on my application, and then in the interview they've asked me about my autism and if that would affect me doing the job, which they're not supposed to ask. It's not a consideration as to whether they should employ me or not… I just sat there trying to assure them that it would be fine. They didn't… say, ‘Well, what could we actually do to help?’ They were just more concerned that this means, you can't do this or can't do that.” (A43)*

A30, who had worked in administration but now did voluntary work, believed that employers considered autistic workers to be undesirable for a number of reasons:

*“When employers think about autism, they don’t think about a wide spectrum. They think they lack any personality, acting inappropriately without being able to rein themselves in and being a ‘bad look’ for the organisation, for the general public and more trouble than it’s worth because to make ‘reasonable adjustments’, it might cost more.” (A30)*

The above comments illustrate some of the misunderstandings held by employers in relation to the nature of autism, and consequently its possible impact on decisions to hire autistic candidates.

### 6.2.2 Employers made judgements about an applicant’s autism on the basis of appearance or past achievements

In five cases, employers judged that autistic applicants could not be autistic, referencing their physical appearance or demeanour. A female student in her 20s reported the following reaction to her disclosure of autism:

*“As soon as I mentioned I had autism, they said, ‘Well, you're too pretty to be autistic’… I didn't really know what to say to that. I've had ‘Oh you can speak; you obviously don't have autism.’” (A24)*

Other autistic applicants also experienced surprise from employers that autism was not exclusively a male condition. One female copywriter recalled the following reaction from a potential employer:

*“‘But you're nothing like Rain Man!’ and ‘You're a girl’… and ‘You've got a sense of humour!’… It's just such a cliche. I'm crap at maths, right? I can't do figures or anything like that. And I don’t memorise numbers in the telephone directory. I’m not Rain Man and I'm not like Greta Thunberg. It's just so annoying and I think the biggest thing was ‘But you're a girl!’” (A36)*

The assumption that only males are autistic could have been based on the reality that most of those who have been diagnosed are male (Brugha *et al.*, 2012). As noted in **Chapter 2**, females with autism often go undiagnosed or are diagnosed later in life because, unlike most males, they are more skilled at ‘masking’ their symptoms, albeit at a cost to their mental health (Beck *et al.*, 2020; Hirvikoski *et al.*, 2020). A29 said that by regularly camouflaging her autism she had been able to work successfully at a relatively senior level in the Civil Service but at a cost:

*“You are so exhausted, doing all this (masking) and your reward when you turn around and say, ‘Well, actually I've got autism’ is ‘No, you haven't. You don't present as autistic, there's nothing that you do that looks autistic to me.’ And you're like, ‘That's from years of f\*\*\*\*\*\* practice.’ I have done everything possible that I can do to fit in and my reward is that you don't believe me because I've actually done what I tried to do. It’s really horrible.” (A29)*

Similarly, another female autistic job applicant commented on the tendency of employers to assume that only males can be autistic:

*“I think there are stereotypes about autism and it is still based on more characteristically male sets of traits, and a female may be disadvantaged by that stereotype. I think (employers) don't necessarily understand that there's a huge variety within autism …so one way of working with a person whose autism is familiar may not be appropriate for the next person who comes along… everybody is different and you have to take the trouble and the time to understand that person and their particular profile.” (A35)*

Like A29, A35 felt some individuals were suspicious of her autism diagnosis because she had operated successfully in the neurotypical world, although it had impacted on her mental wellbeing:

*“(People think) you can't be autistic because you couldn't have got to the level that you did in your career if you hadn’t been able to function among neurotypical people. I think that's possibly a suspicion that people apply to my case…” (A35)*

It has been suggested that stereotyping can be overcome by giving training to employers on autism (Jones, DeBrabander and Sasson, 2021). However, participants gave examples of occasions on which they were doubted by employers even in organisations where there had been specific autism training. A26, a social worker in a mental health team, explained that her camouflaging had both exhausted her and led employers and colleagues to question her diagnosis:

*“I think when you're …unintentionally camouflaging really strongly all day long, it's so exhausting. It's like burnout… and it's the physical pain and stuff when you get to the point that you just can't go on anymore. And I think particularly as a woman, the feeling I get is you're not taken seriously, or your diagnosis is questioned because you don't fit the idea people think of ASD …I work in a mental health social work team… a lot of our work does involve people with autism so everyone thinks they know everything. Then someone like me comes along … and they're like, ‘Are you sure? I don't think so!’ It's what I got a lot of from my manager once I'd been assessed which was ‘Oh God, I'm so surprised… but you're not like this and you're not like that’. But people only see one side. I always think the ‘swan’ analogy [i.e. looking calm above the water but furiously paddling below] is perfect, because that's exactly how I am.” (A26)*

Others also stated that the often-invisible nature of autism could lead to employers minimising the condition compared with that of the physically disabled, or suggesting that it was only given as an excuse for special treatment:

*“The other thing is people saying you don't seem autistic. In my mind that falls into the category of seeking to minimise the social barriers that exist… or that you’re attention seeking…looking for special treatment … or you're looking to tick a box. And someone said… a month after I'd ‘come out’ – ‘We really need to do some work around disability in terms of our workforce and it's time we had some properly disabled people as well, people in wheelchairs.’ And I just thought… so I've been told that there is a hierarchy of disabilities as well. And I think people with autism don't always seem as needing... I guess any invisible disability … isn't seen as having a proper set of disability-related needs or barriers.” (A20)*

*“It was both said and implied at various points (that her diagnosis was an excuse for not doing certain tasks). Yes - and it's quite the opposite. I got the diagnosis in no small part for protection in a situation that was on a route to destroying me.” (A21)*

By contrast, A29 said that it had been a relief to be managed by someone who had an understanding of the condition and did not question her sincerity when she needed to raise an issue resulting from her autism:

*“My current manager… was introduced to the idea that autistic people think differently. It doesn't mean it's wrong; it just means it's different. So, she was a lot more sympathetic to the way that I process things and a lot more accepting that if I say I'm having difficulty with this, I'm probably having difficulty with this, rather than the automatic, ‘She's just putting it on, it's b\*\*\*\*\*\*\*.’” (A29)*

A34, who had trained as a nurse but was now working in administration, recalled an occasion where an HR representative questioned the existence of autism:

*“I was in some training and… this guy, who was an HR rep and a union rep, said, ‘Well it's not a real thing, it's not like something you go and get a certificate for from the doctor. You just say you're autistic and then actually, that's it…’ That is where you're incorrect. It's an actual diagnosis. It's a diagnosable feature of somebody's makeup. And whether you view it as a disorder or not, it is a real thing, it’s not just for awkward people to try and have an excuse to behave however they want.” (A34)*

Many participants spoke of the influence of the media in forming attitudes to autism among the general public. Some believed that the increased publicity surrounding the condition was a positive development and led to a greater awareness of autism. The majority, however, thought the media projected a distorted and stereotypical view that was misleading and potentially damaging. A34 criticised the negative impact of the media in relation to autism, particularly when it was the sole means by which the public learned of the condition:

*“Every now and again, there'll be some horrific case, generally it's murders or something awful has happened. And then the person has tried to use (autism) as a defence and therefore it's in the papers or the news reports. And for some people that's the only real thing, apart from ‘Rain Man’ and that dreadful film that that singer has just made called ‘Music’*[[5]](#footnote-5)*, that's all they know about autism really. I don't think they would sit there and go, ‘Oh well, better not employ that person because I hear that autistic people are all murderers’, or what have you. But it's bound to have some effect, if that's the only thing that they know about an autistic person.” (A34)*

Similarly, the head of a small charity, whose son was autistic, remarked on the confusion that surrounded the nature of autism, particularly given its representation in the media in recent years, which had led some to make ill-informed comments on the condition:

*“The difficulty is… it's like it’s become very fashionable. Autism was suddenly everywhere, you know, and then, oh I love this one: ‘I've got a touch of autism’ or ‘He's a bit autistic.’ I mean it's, you know, it's insane really, what goes on. I think we have to all be careful of not stereotyping the person.” (E2)*

### 6.2.3 Employers’ attitudes to autistic applicants were sometimes influenced by previous association with an autistic person

In certain cases, perhaps analogous to the phenomenon of transference (Jung, 1954), employers appeared to attribute certain characteristics that they had noted in one autistic individual to others with autism. In psychological terms, transference is a phenomenon whereby an individual redirects their own emotions towards one individual onto another. This may occur in psychoanalysis when the patient expresses feelings towards the therapist based on their past feelings about someone else (particularly a parent). The experience of some autistic participants was that employers who had had some involvement with an autistic individual – perhaps a relative or past employee – expected the same traits and characteristics to be comprehensively displayed in all autistic people, irrespective of age, gender or background. An example is A18, who explained her surprise at an employer’s comments when she disclosed her autism:

*“I mentioned that I had Asperger's and he said, ‘Oh, I know someone else who has that - he had a problem with anger management.’ I didn't respond when he said that and I think I should have said, ‘Well, not everyone has got problems with anger management, you know, it’s not one of my problems’ but I didn't respond and I don't think that helped me.” (A18)*

Similarly, when applying for a job in fraud investigation at her local council, A51 recalled:

*“I did talk about (my diagnosis) and at the end of the interview the manager said, ‘Off the record, can I just ask you?’ And she started asking me all these questions and said, ‘Because my nephew’s autistic and I would never think that you were!’ So, from then I thought, ‘Oh you don't get it.’” (A51)*

A34, a middle-aged administrator, found that she was being compared to her manager’s six-year-old son:

*“The manager's son had recently been diagnosed with autism. And he was, like, six years old and I got my diagnosis shortly before joining that team. And so, I did tell the manager, and everything he said to me or about me was through the lens of his boy. So, if I did something that X did - like I'm good at maths, I'm pretty good with formulas and things like that and stats, ‘Oh, my X is just like that! He loves maths.’ But then because I like to be presented quite neatly and clean and things like that, ‘Oh, X isn't like that at all!’ Well, he’s only six years old and I’m a 43-year-old woman. And we're not the same person and so that was a bit weird.” (A34)*

A34 went on to say that her performance at work had also previously been compared to that of another autistic individual who had worked for the company, with her line manager expecting her to demonstrate the same strengths and weaknesses, even though he had received some in-house training on autism:

*“I think it depends who people have met as colleagues as well because I've had that from line managers before, where they don't just expect the problems that other people might have had to come up with me, but they also expect me to have all that other person's strengths as well. And I might not …. So ‘so and so’ was really good with that particular aspect of the job. I'm like, ‘Great, I can't do it, not as well as they were, anyway.’ … I would say when you’ve met one autistic person, you’ve met one autistic person.” (A34)*

### 6.2.4 Employers may view autistic applicants as suited to specific jobs

Examples of stereotyping were found in relation to an employer’s perception of autistic employees’ suitability to a job. A15, who has a master’s degree in arts subjects, recalled that because she had a diagnosis of autism, an employer assumed that she would be skilled in a particular type of work that they associated with those on the autism spectrum:

*“The Job Centre invited me to a forum about autistic people and… they had some trade stands for jobs, and one wanted autistic people to do very fine work filing down springs for use in aeroplanes. And when I went up to the stand they assumed because I was autistic, I would be able to do this sort of work.” (A15)*

The notion that autism is an indicator to employers of a certain type of skill was common:

*“I think the perceptions they can have are like you're very, very skilled in one specific thing. They have a lot of stereotyped views of like you're Sheldon*[[6]](#footnote-6) *from ‘The Big Bang Theory’ or someone with all these facts in your head. You're just really aloof and like you don't want to interact with the people and that it might be more hard work to have you.” (A43)*

*“I think, unfortunately, because of the industry of organisations that try to support autistic people into employment, the main messaging is that autistic people are your tireless data validators. You know, they are suitable for data related roles as analysts. They're the people you want to hide in your basement to fix the computers.” (A20)*

As explained in section **5.1.2** above, ‘negative’ stereotyping such as the perception of autism as a learning disability was clearly disadvantageous to autistic applicants. But equally detrimental was the sometimes misguided ‘positive’ stereotyping, where autism was viewed as a particular ‘gift’ which brought certain expectations. While A18 had been the subject of negative stereotyping at one interview (where her employer implied that autistic people might have ‘anger management’ problems), she related another experience where the employer believed that her autism was a positive attribute that would guarantee perfection in her work:

*“I mean both with autism or Asperger's some people do think that if you've got Asperger’s, you've got some sort of wonderful talent, you know special talents, and I can't see that I have... I mean the lady that I do voluntary work for at the NHS, she's got this idea that people with autism don't make mistakes and are very accurate, and I don't feel that that applies to me.” (A18)*

Similarly, A36, a freelance worker was complimented by her employer on qualities that he assumed were to be found in all autistic people, related:

*“The guy that I currently work for is like my main base wage... and he’s always saying about me - and he means it in the nicest, in the kindest way and I do take it as a compliment - he often says to the subcontractors, ‘I wish we could have four or five more people like X because she's reliable. She always turns up when she says she will, she completes everything in an orderly, in a timely manner and she just gets stuff done.’ And he says he thinks it is because I am autistic… but he likes and appreciates it and he says it's a really good skill to have, and he wishes that everyone else had that same ability.” (A36)*

A43, an autistic person who had qualified as a masseuse and also gave voluntary talks on autism to employers, explained the drawbacks of ‘positive’ stereotyping:

*“I think it's about looking at people as people first, and then using diagnostic labels as a guideline and a signpost rather than as a prescription for how to work with that person. Because as well as obviously not having the knowledge, sometimes I don’t think the generalisations that people make about the benefits of having an autistic person in your organisation are always that helpful either because they can give people a false idea of what to expect. They go, well, actually people with autism tend to be very reliable, they will always be honest. And you'll find that they'll be very focused on what they're doing and not want to talk to other people. And that's not always true, because sometimes somebody that's autistic might be very lonely at home and want to talk to people but not know how to. And then the only place they get to talk to somebody might be at work …” (A43)*

She went on to explain that, like A18, she had experienced both ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ stereotyping, which were disadvantageous in different ways:

*“I've had it from both sides where my doctor has thought, ‘Well, you're perfectly capable of telling me everything that you need to, if you need to’, which I'm not. And then on the other hand, he's seen something I've written and said ‘Oh, did you write this yourself?’… as if I wouldn't be capable of doing that. So, I've had it from both angles when people see where I'm struggling and I'm not as articulate, so they think I'm not capable of anything. But then when they see me like this, they think that I don't really struggle. So… it's those polarizations of both ends: you either get too many expectations put on you or not enough kind of belief put your way.” (A43)*

In the same vein, participants found sometimes that while employers were inclined to believe that autistic job applicants would acquit themselves well in jobs calling for mathematical or scientific skills, they would lack the necessary emotional qualities for posts that required empathy and care. A32 applied for a job as a Coroner’s court clerk on the advice of his Disability Settlement Officer, having previously worked as the manager of a GP practice:

*“He said this job would suit me so I applied for it and I didn't get it. And then when I asked for advice or tips on what did I do wrong, or what could I learn, apparently the feedback was that because I had Asperger’s it meant that I wouldn't be able to empathise with the deceased’s relatives, even though we discussed that in the interview… (and I gave) examples of having done it in the past as a practice manager. It was not uncommon, you know, I would meet people who had lost (relatives) so you know he obviously chose not to take that into account.” (A32)*

A20, who worked in a senior position in the creative sector, observed:

*“I think there's a general misperception about empathy and I've had my own manager say, ‘Oh I think so and so on our team is autistic’ or ‘a bit autistic’ in a way that is used as a derogatory term to refer to someone with poor interpersonal skills.” (A20)*

Finally, A51 described her experience of applying for a job working with autistic children:

*“I had to write an A4 page of why I would be good at the job and I had said that actually my Asperger’s would enable me to understand the children who have it because I'll be able to know what to do, and strategies and stuff. And he actually said to me, ‘Yes, I'm a little concerned about this. How is this going to affect you doing your job?’” (A51)*

In fact, recent research supports the view that people on the autism spectrum are much more at ease with each other than with non-autistic people. Referred to as the “double empathy” theory, studies have shown that autistic people build a greater rapport among themselves, and connect more directly than with non-autistic people who have less insight into the autistic condition (DeBrabander *et al.*, 2019; Morrison *et al.*, 2020).

### 6.2.5 Employers’ observations on autism and stereotyping

When relating their understanding of autism, many employers cited commonly reported characteristics such as poor eye contact and social skills or, in one case, that *‘(the) brain works differently than a neurotypical person’s’ (E6).* Most employers stated that they lacked a detailed understanding of autism. The Head of Diversity and Inclusion at a major retailer admitted that more needed to be done in her organisation to understand the condition, and to facilitate the hiring of autistic candidates:

*“In all honesty, my awareness of the condition is pretty low… and I’ve got a lot more to do to educate myself. We know we're not great at certain things when it veers from the norm so to speak. And one thing that we are doing as part of our broader inclusion, diversity plans is really looking at that kind of end-to-end recruitment and onboarding experience.” (E5)*

She went on to say how the experiences of the company she had recently left (also a high street brand) impacted on her former company’s assignment of roles in the workplace for autistic people:

*“So … in the store environment… some of our colleagues with autism just didn't want to interact with customers. They didn't feel comfortable and confident with that so… rather than putting them on the checkout … we might say, we can put you on the shop floor on replenishment with maybe a degree of customer interaction, but certainly not as much as if you're on a checkout… and we found data processing roles to be quite successful as well.” (E5)*

Similarly, one human resources manager gave an account drawn from her observations of scientific staff in the establishment where she worked:

*“… we do we have a lot of scientists that probably do have autism, but don't actually even know that they have until they undergo some kind of diagnosis and they're like, ‘Oh it makes sense how I think about things now’. So, some people can be really focused and they get really blinkered down into detail level. Some of our staff find it hard to deal with multiple demands put on them. It's like they need to have one thing at a time. Where I've worked recently, it caused a lot of social anxiety. They didn't like to speak to new people. They didn't like to be on camera on Zoom. They always wanted to go last if there was a round robin of anything so they had time to prepare their thoughts and responses. And sometimes I think the social skills can go. So, they don't understand how to communicate in what we consider the kind of social norms or they struggle with that, and occasionally can come across as what other people might consider a little bit rude, but it's not. It’s just that kind of thought process.” (E9)*

Although the above narratives describe a number of the characteristics that have been said to be typical of people who present with classic autism (Pellecchia *et al.*, 2021), they are not representative of others on the autism spectrum who include, for example, those working in the creative industry, performing arts, medicine and the care sector (Feinstein, 2018)

### 6.2.6 Employers acknowledged the risk of stereotyping autistic candidates

Most of the participating employers recognised that they needed to guard against stereotyping. One HR manager for an organisation in the creative sector remarked that, although strict guidelines were in operation, she and her HR colleagues could not guarantee that stereotyping would not enter occasionally into the selection panel’s decisions when interviewing an autistic applicant:

*“In HR, we can't be at every single job interview because there's just not enough of us and I wonder whether there is a little bit of that, you know, thinking around those stereotypical skill sets.” (E6)*

Similarly, another HR manager representing a high street brand explained that there were risks of stereotyping, even when additional guidance had been given to hiring managers to use in the case of autistic candidates. Consequently, interviewers might not distinguish between presentation and content in the candidate’s answers:

*“I would love to say that our hiring managers just follow our method of assessment, which is that we use ORC, so, observe and record what they say, and that's what we ask them to do. But I think it comes down to the hiring manager’s ability, awareness, understanding, bias, etc. We try and provide the right tools but then there is human nature. Also, if the candidate has disclosed beforehand, we in the central resourcing team would have talked this through with the hiring manager and made them aware of some things that we know about and discussed with the candidate. They (autistic candidates) might say, ‘I really struggle with eye contact’ and we would have made the hiring manager aware of that, and reinforced that that has no bearing on whether they can do the role or not, so not to consider it. But I can see we could get it wrong at that stage ... most of which would be the hiring manager’s ability to separate content with how it's presented.” (E3)*

Further concerns were expressed by the Head of Diversity and Inclusion in another leading retailer, where the final hiring decision was devolved in the majority of cases to individual store managers, a process she suspected might lead to *“real bias”*:

***“****It's something that we need to review because I'm not particularly comfortable with it. But at the moment in stores, it is generally one person which I think gives us a bit of a risk actually – not just to do with interviewing people with autism - but in general and either way there could be real bias in the process… we've got to work with our line managers and help them understand so that we don't get into a stereotype expectation when they're interviewing people.” (E5)*

E5 suggested that a requirement might be introduced for an additional staff member to attend interviews, although there were no firm plans to do this. A significant part of her unease was that, although furnished with guidelines on how to conduct the interview process (as in the case of E3 above), she was aware of store managers taking shortcuts:

*“On paper we have a consistent process but it's not always applied consistently at local level… because some hiring managers may take licence to do what they feel is right rather than using the right tools and the right resources. So, in theory the interview should be very much competency-based around the X (name of the retailer) ways of working, our values essentially (but)… managers are just not following our standard operating processes (and) regardless of who's walking through the door, (it’s) more, ‘You know what? Actually, I've not got much time today so I'm just going to do a quick two-minute interview’ literally, as bad as that sounds.” (E5)*

The pitfalls for employers in assuming any particular skills or traits when hiring an autistic employee were also underlined by a labour market intermediary with over twenty years’ experience of placing autistic job seekers with employers:

*“We've got 150 individual clients we're supporting with the same or functionally similar diagnosis but in many cases with diametrically opposite presentations of the same trait under the same heading, whether it's sensory sensitivities or degree of sociability, whatever it is, communication preferences. If you find one autistic person to say this is what autism is, I can find another autistic person that presents in the opposite way … they're both autistic. It’s one of the difficulties of a single label covering such a massive range of individual ability.” (S5)*

It would appear from the above findings that autistic people, compared with their neurotypical counterparts, face a range of barriers to employment in relation to stereotyping. Employers had certain expectations of their abilities or limitations, and in some cases even questioned their diagnosis. Also, most participating employers acknowledged that they had a limited understanding of the condition and, while procedures were sometimes in place to obviate bias and stereotyping, employers were not confident that they were adhered to in practice.

## 6.3 Person-job fit (P-J fit)

Person-job fit (P-J fit) is the matching of individuals with particular abilities to the specific requirements of a job (Edwards, 1991)). As was indicated in the last section, some employers have preconceptions of the types of job to which autistic people may be suited. However, P-J fit is normally assessed by a detailed analysis of the components of the job, identifying the skills, knowledge, and abilities to perform specific tasks, and matching these against the competencies of the applicant. In this section, two specific elements of the process for assessing P-J fit, which were found to impact particularly on autistic applicants, will be examined: the job description and situational judgement tests.

### 6.3.1 Job descriptions

The main vehicle for detailing the specific nature of a job, and conveying it to potential applicants, is the job description. In addition, a person specification may be included, outlining the skills and experience required in order to perform the job effectively. It is the person specification that recruiters will often use to assess whether an applicant is qualified for the job. However, it was mainly the job description that was identified as a critical barrier by autistic participants in the study pilot. For the purposes of this research, the term ‘job description’ is used to denote all the descriptive material the job applicant may receive in relation to the content of the job and the skills required. Although there has been some reference in the literature to the difficulty posed by job descriptions for autistic people, it is not an area that has been explored in depth. Furthermore, the literature to date does not appear to extend to an examination of the views of employers, and the impact that their job descriptions may have on autistic candidates (Scott *et al.*, 2018; Hurley-Hanson, Giannantonio and Griffiths, 2020; Davies *et al.*, 2023). This section will therefore synthesise the views and experiences of autistic job applicants, employers and other stakeholders such as job coaches and labour market intermediaries in relation to job descriptions.

The majority of autistic participants cited the job description as one of the barriers to applying for jobs, as they experienced difficulty with interpreting the precise nature of the post from the information given. The length of the document, the use of ‘jargon’ such as ‘dynamic’ and ‘outgoing’ were problems that were identified with job descriptions, while the need to distinguish between ‘essential’ and ‘desirable’ elements of the post (where these were not clearly stated) and the common stipulation concerning ‘good communication skills’ were some of the additional challenges faced by participants in interpreting the person specification. Their decision as to whether they were a good ‘job-fit’ was therefore clearly hindered by their difficulty in understanding the competencies necessary for the job.

### 6.3.2 Job descriptions were a barrier for many autistic job applicants

The majority of participants for whom job descriptions posed a problem commented on their length, which paradoxically in some cases led to less clarity about the requirements of the post. A23, a teaching assistant, explained:

*“Sometimes it would put me off actually applying for jobs because it's just so much, whereas if it was like bullet points or something to say this, this and this it would be a lot clearer, whereas it never is. There's a load of stuff but it actually isn't really clear what the job role actually is. I know I’ve seen job descriptions and I've just been really confused by them.” (A23)*

Similarly, A47, a statistician, and A36, a freelance copywriter, commented on the length of descriptions, even for part-time posts at a junior level:

***“****They just put everything in that it might be, rather than what it's likely to be. I got one and... it’s four or five pages for a half-time job (as a support officer).” (A47)*

*“There were pages and pages of everything that was expected for a job that was an hour and a half a day, and was literally just answering emails.” (A36)*

A20 outlined the sometimes-conflicting aspects of job descriptions and person specifications that led to confusion:

*“There's a reference to minimum requirements but then the minimum requirements aren't always clearly listed. You'll get what's called a job description and then you'll get a person specification. But sometimes the person spec doesn't actually list what is required and what's desirable. Some companies are good at that but others aren't and then sometimes you'll have multiple lists. So, the main job description might have a list of things that they're looking for, and areas of responsibility. And then the person spec will have a completely different list of things that they're looking for. It can be very confusing to know which ones to focus on.” (A20)*

Person specifications typically listed the required competencies for a post, of which some were ‘essential’, and the rest ‘desirable’. However, the distinction between the two was not always clear according to some autistic participants, which posed particular problems for one applicant applying under the Guaranteed Interview Scheme (GIS). The GIS, later replaced by the Disability Confident Scheme, guaranteed an interview to disabled applicants, if they scored 60% of the total possible marks across the ‘essential’ criteria for the job (www.gov.uk, 2019). A29, a policy adviser, applied for a post under the GIS provisions but the failure, in her opinion, to clearly distinguish between the ‘essential’ and ‘desirable’ elements of the job disadvantaged her, and led to an official complaint:

*“I've got a current tribunal claim against an employer because they set out the job in their job adverts so badly that I couldn't work out what the ‘essential’ criteria were and … so I had to pick what I thought were the ‘essential’ criteria… If an employer is going to have GIS or Disability Confident or one of those schemes, they need to be able to put an ad in place that's understandable and very clear.” (A29)*

One employer, a national organisation in the arts sector, acknowledged that in recent years they had not refined their job descriptions or made a sufficiently clear distinction between the ‘essential’ and ‘desirable’ elements in their person specifications, which impacted on their own operation of the Guaranteed Interview Scheme:

*“It wasn't clear under the Guaranteed Interview Scheme that we were meeting our obligation with the old style of job descriptions. I did a new template… and when we're doing the job evaluation on them and we're also reviewing them for accessibility and diversity, we will spend quite a lot of time moving stuff from ‘essential’ to ‘desirable’ and just making sure that the wording is very clear on the ‘essential’.” (E6)*

Another serious criticism of the Guaranteed Interview Scheme was raised by A20, who is both autistic and has experience of recruiting candidates in some public sector organisations:

*“Many companies state they will give candidates a guaranteed interview, if they meet the minimum criteria. I think you're given an advantage in theory. In practice, and as someone that recruits, I know that people who are recruiting often are trying to minimise the number of candidates they have to interview so they will reduce scores of disabled candidates in order to avoid having to interview them because they would take up too much time. That's a fact.” (A20)*

### 6.3.3 Many autistic applicants experienced difficulty with ‘jargon’

Most participants commented on the challenge of understanding ‘jargon’, which they considered to be less accessible to the autistic mind:

***“****They have their buzzwords and stuff, don't they? It's trying to understand what that means, because they can be very vague. So, I think sometimes I can get put off jobs because of not really understanding what it is, and what it entails. But then I get overwhelmed by the amount of information so you get job descriptions and person specifications, then you get like the blurb of what it is.” (A43)*

*“The main problem I have is jargon or things just basically not being described in simple terms … overly flowery, florid language to describe something that probably is quite simple …. So, I think that makes it difficult for me to read between the lines and work out … if it matches the skills that I can offer. I often find that (there’s)… pages and pages … and I'm overwhelmed, and I've not even finished reading the job description. So that kind of puts a barrier up to me going any further with an application because I can't process it, it's way too much.” (A36)*

*“I think sometimes it's all lost in the jargon. It's all lost in their understanding and almost automatically the autistic person is expected to know what they're thinking and feeling…” (A27)*

Those who had recently applied for jobs, not having gone through the job application process for some years, were particularly challenged by the nature of current job descriptions. A40, who had a degree in psychology and was looking for jobs in administration, commented:

*“The job descriptions are quite lengthy and it’s difficult to know what they really mean in practical terms, unless you’ve done the particular job in that job description… Also, what throws me is about soft skills that you need, which I never really looked at before. Now it just seems to go on and on. You’re looking at all these descriptions and you’re not sure if you fit that or not, and you’re going back to your previous experience, trying to compare. It’s quite hard.” (A40)*

Younger, less experienced workers were also baffled sometimes by the descriptions. A48, a student who was looking for part-time jobs in customer service, explained:

*“They're using all these phrases that don't explain the job. I feel like they're just talking about ‘You're working in a team and we're going to make customers happy’, and that doesn't tell me what the job is. Like, will I be standing behind a cash register or am I going to deliver things? …What am I doing? I saw one position, I was trying to find a sort of simple, part-time job driving stuff around, but their descriptions were very confusing and I was wondering, like, do they want me to go to people's houses and fix their stuff for them because… I don't know what they want from me.” (A48)*

Similarly, A20 had noted a number of jargonistic terms that lacked clarity and would act as ‘red flags’ for him and some other autistic people:

*“Some terms that I've seen are… red flags: “people who are good at multitasking” … I mean, I can proceed with different things during a day, but not simultaneously and having to chop and change is really quite draining and causes me a lot of irritation if I'm being interrupted, so I think there is definitely a neurotypical concept of multitasking which is off-putting… I think it's more of a lazy assumption that everyone knows what that means, and actually it can mean different things to different people and it can provide a barrier to some people. The second one is ‘good energy levels’. There was a director level job I was thinking about going for last year within my own company, but there was this thing about having “good energy”. And I think a big struggle for me this year has been around managing my energy levels and managing the structure of my day so that I don't go into shut down at five pm.” (A20)*

The phrase ‘good energy levels’ is an illustration of the type of ill-defined term sometimes used in job descriptions that may lead autistic (and possibly other) applicants to question their suitability to the job without more specific information on which to base their decision. Although it might be unlawful, it may arguably imply a preference for younger people or those without disability. But a reference to specific tasks and responsibilities such as extensive travel or management of a large team, might better inform applicants and avoid misinterpretation.

A6, a graduate in his forties, commented in particular on the changes in job descriptions since the advent of online job advertisements and the sometimes-hyperbolic descriptions that made it more difficult for him to interpret the nature of the job:

*“I get quite angry as I'm prevented from accessing a lot of jobs because I don't understand the actual job descriptions. It used to be you went into the Job Centre, you had a little postcard and no more than 50 words on it, whereas now because it’s online they can waffle on to the hills... (but) they don’t tell you who it’s for, they don’t tell you where it is. They keep all this information aside now … but it’s two pages long and I literally have no idea what the job is. One job I read, it sounded like they wanted the next Richard Branson or Steve Jobs and it turned out it was for KFC. But I didn't understand that because it just went on and on about what we want is a dynamic, go-getter who's up for being flexible. To me the modern job market is getting more and more hostile to the autistic individual … all the jobs are about job buzzwords. They want ‘forward - thinking, creative, super flexible and dynamic…’” (A6)*

Similarly, A42, a graduate who had worked in the criminal justice system, recalled a particular post that she was interested in but had been unable to determine the exact duties from the job description:

*“There was one job with the police and it was a lot of jargon in terms of intelligence, but it didn't give any practical examples of what they actually wanted you to do. And so, I was looking up lots of things on the internet to see what it was they were actually talking about. And then there was a lot of information about the organisation’s format and who's where and all the different departments but not anything a bit more practical about what I'd be doing on a day-to-day basis.” (A42)*

A52, a young graduate who had been working in a customer service role in a supermarket, said the complexity of some job descriptions could be off-putting, although he was unsure whether that was the result of his autism, lack of self-esteem, or the two were related:

*“I don't know how much this relates to ASD and how much it relates to just confidence but I always do find the job descriptions and job titles as well so much fancier. You look at them and go, ‘Oh, I can't do that...” And actually, you probably can… but it's when they put it into fancy words and fancy titles … it prevents you from applying. But is that to do with my autism or is that to do with the fact that I've a lack of self-esteem?... I suppose it does link to autism … because if you're looking at taking things literally, like I must be able to operate a particular database, I can't do that, but actually that's something that you can learn.” (A52)*

Common phrases or ‘buzzwords’ that caused autistic applicants to question their suitability to certain posts often centred on the ‘soft’ skills included in person specifications which failed to explain the precise role the employee would need to fulfil. A30 questioned some typical requirements:

*“Some of the concepts and cliches like ‘a good team player’ – what does that mean? I might misread body language or not understand concepts. I’m not always clear what the essentials are of the job.” (A30)*

Similarly, A11, who had worked mainly as a creative designer, explained that his perception of ‘team work’ might differ significantly from that of the employer:

*“The problem is I generally don’t know quite what somebody’s looking for and a lot of stupid things like, what your team skills are. Like they’ve got their idea of what that means conventionally, and I’ve got something else because my idea of a team is The A Team, or one of those TV teams where you have the flirty one, the leader one, the big strong warrior one and the nerdy, techy one. That’s my definition of a team whereas theirs might be, well, everybody’s a cog in this team and they also work together and … I’m not on the same planet as them.” (A11)*

### 6.3.4 Competencies such as ‘good communication skills’ posed particular challenges

Given the nature of autism, which generally includes some impairment of social communication (Wing and Gould, 1979), competencies such as ‘good communication skills’ raised concerns for most, particularly where the job description did not explain the precise requirements of the role:

***“****I’ve never seen a job description where that’s specified or what they mean by it.” (A42)*

*“I don't like ‘good communication skills’. It can mean different things to different people, depending on the job you do.” (A36)*

*“I don't think it's very clear. They just say they want ‘good communication skills’. It doesn't specify what type, you know.” (A40)*

*“’Communications’ is quite generic and I don't know what they want to assess. I did English GCSE so I'm able to write in English, if that's what they mean.” (A25)*

***“****I wonder what they mean by ‘communication skills’. Do they mean communications with the customers, like I’ve had a friendly relationship with them and I've listened to them? Do they mean I communicate well with my team? Do they mean that I tell my boss if I'm sick?... Sometimes they describe what communication skills you need like … you need to be able to write emails or make good phone calls… ‘communication skills’ is so open, there's so many ways to communicate.” (A48)*

A36, who spoke articulately about the impact of autism on her communication skills, explained that whilst she considered herself a good communicator, like a lot of autistic people she lacked the capacity for lengthy exchanges with others:

*“So, I'm autistic but I don't think I'm a bad communicator. The difference between me and maybe someone else who is a neurotypical person is I just have less capacity for communicating than other people so… my communication battery might run down before someone else's does. But it's also really my idea of good communication might not necessarily be what someone else's idea is.” (A36)*

One participant explained in some detail how her communication skills and level of understanding varied depending on the clarity, rather than the complexity, of the content:

*“So, a lot of them (job descriptions) will say explicitly, ‘good verbal communication skills’ and that always makes me feel uncomfortable because I know even with emails and written communications, sometimes that can be really difficult because it's being able to understand exactly what someone's saying. Like I can read the law, for example, and I'll understand what that means. It's very specific and I can interpret that in a very logical way. But then if I get letters from the DWP (Department for Work and Pensions), I have no idea what they're saying… so you can have this thing that's really difficult to explain to people: I'm very articulate, I'm very intelligent. I can read and I can interpret these really clever things, but when you send me my energy bill … it doesn't make any sense, I don't understand that, and I can be both those people. And that's always really hard.” (A43)*

Where they were unsure of the nature or extent of the communication skills required, two autistic applicants said they decided against applying:

*“It puts me off applying for a job that says that because obviously I can speak and things like that, but I think with autism, this disability affects your communication. So… I don't feel I could honestly say I've got the communication skills (although) I think I've got enough communication skills to like manage (day to day life).” (A45)*

*“It does make me take a step back to be fair when I do see that, because it's really hard to say, ‘Yes, I've got good communication skills’ when I've actually got a disorder that’s partly communication, and so it does make me quite wary and knocks your confidence a little bit because they’re asking for something that I know myself I'm okay with when I’m… comfortable and settled. But to actually do it at the beginning, it’s quite a hard job and, if I do see that, I usually do avoid it.” (A23)*

By contrast two participants took the pragmatic view that most job descriptions would include some reference to ‘good communication skills’ and they would have to respond as best they could:

*“I think it's in everything but… it’s not like a database. I can't say ‘Yes, I've used that ….’ Have I got good communication? How do I measure it? In every job you're going to work with people so you can always chuck something in about, ‘Oh, I communicated and blahdy blah and I had to do this.’ It doesn't mean I've got good communication skills … I kind of roll my eyes a bit because I don't like to put it in because it seems so wishy-washy, but it's not going to stop me because I wouldn't be applying to almost any job.” (A52)*

*“In most jobs they are asking for things like ‘communication skills’… (which) I'm going to struggle with. But then you're kind of kicking yourself out of the job (if you don’t apply).” (A11)*

A37, an engineer, had received training from her employer to ‘improve’ her communications but believed for those trying to enter the job market, it was a serious barrier:

*“I object to it (the requirement for ‘good communications’) because… for autistic people trying to get into employment for the first time, trying to communicate in an employment-friendly way, I think is a barrier.” (A37)*

Autistic people are noted in many cases for their directness and honesty in dealings with others. For this reason, A23 struggled with how to present what she regarded as the limitations to her communication skills and team work:

*“I'm not very good at lying. I'm very, very honest, so I would never be able to say it even when writing person specs, CVs etc when you’re supposed to write that you’re a good communicator. That's the main thing that you're supposed to write but I'm not always a good communicator and… I don't always like working in a team. It depends who I’m working with. I quite like working independently. So, it's really hard to be like oh, I’m really good at that. It depends on who I’m working with…(and) I have to say that because I don't like lying … ” (A23)*

A35, who had worked successfully in the public sector, applied for jobs following a career break. Her recent diagnosis of autism had made her re-appraise her communication skills, particularly some of the more subtle aspects of interpretation that may be required in the workplace, where ‘office politics’ are in play:

*“Before my diagnosis or my fuller awareness of my autistic traits, I wouldn't have seen it as a barrier to applying. I would have just thought, that's fine, I can do that. But now I've realised my more limited appreciation of what ‘good communication skills’ look like from the employer’s side and, in particular, I've got concerns about my maybe lower level of sophistication on the communication skills, particularly when you're getting to the sort of politics, organisational politics. And the kind of manoeuvring and manipulation that you need to be able to carry off sometimes to drive forward an agenda. So, I would probably now see that as more of a barrier to applying, or I'd be much less confident of my ability on that front.” (A35)*

In all the above cases, the lack of clarity of the precise level of communication required in the advertised role caused applicants to pause and sometimes decide against applying, when in fact they might have had the appropriate level of competence. One labour market intermediary, who provided training to employers on adapting their recruitment procedures to assist autistic applicants, commented on the obscurity and inappropriateness of some competencies in job descriptions. He explained:

*“I go through the job description and suggest changes (to the employer) from an autism language perspective, taking out things that will lead to potential candidates deciding that this isn't the job for them. The typical one is ‘must be a good communicator’ and that's on everything, even the IT support roles say it. And my own experience of dealing with IT support staff hasn't been overall that they've got great people skills. It’s just not necessary… “(S5)*

S2, a trade union representative and herself autistic, endorsed this view and related how she had been influential in securing changes to the job description for a customer service post in the company she worked for:

*“You wouldn’t be surprised to see a job advert that said: ‘Friendly, outgoing team player required for computer programmer.’ But you don’t need to be a friendly, outgoing team player to be a computer programmer - you can be an anti-social nerd. Last year they were advertising for customer service assistants at X (the company she worked for) which read ‘Approachable people with outgoing personality are encouraged to apply for this post.’ It’s fair enough that you should ask that people are approachable because they need to be polite and will be asked questions. But you do not need to have an outgoing personality, and we got them to drop that.” (S2)*

### 6.3.5 Employers acknowledged a lack of clarity and focus in their job descriptions

Most employers acknowledged that there was a problem with their job descriptions. The Head of Resources for a public sector scientific organisation stated:

 *“Our job descriptions are definitely a barrier, especially the scientific ones, they are horrendous.” (E8)*

Consequently, they had engaged an occupational psychologist to run a skills workshop with line managers to explain how to write a ‘neutral’ job description.

Similarly, E6, a recruitment manager in a non-departmental public body, admitted that a number of their job descriptions needed revision:

*“We have a number of these kind of legacy job descriptions, which I'll be honest with you would be a nightmare not just for autistic candidates but anyone that doesn't know (the organisation).” (E6)*

They were now in the slow process of updating these as jobs came up for recruitment *“mainly taking a red pen to them to take out some of that kind of vagueness” (E6).* Other employers were also taking the initiative of adapting their job descriptions to make them more accessible to autistic participants. A recruitment manager in a large retail organisation that interviewed some 60,000 applicants each year explained that the problem was sometimes the result of individual hiring managers preparing inappropriate job descriptions:

*“They (job descriptions) are a real bugbear of mine. Job descriptions in our organisation are not centrally owned, they are owned by the manager of that job and they could work in finance… they could work anywhere, without any knowledge of what's important in a job description, what might be particular characteristics and therefore illegal to put in a job description... Our supermarket assistants are owned (centrally)… so those have a bit more rigour around them… as in they can't just add in ‘good communication skills’ or ‘experience required’ when it isn't. Whereas any other role in our organisation it is the manager of that role who is responsible. We have trained our resourcing team in terms of The Equality Act from a legal point of view, and what should be in a job description and what makes them less inclusive. But they don't necessarily see all of them… if they do see one (that requires amendment), they know to respond to it but it's a very reactive way of working as opposed to proactive. So, we have a big issue with job descriptions for lots of reasons.” (E3)*

Similarly, the Head of Diversity and Inclusion at another high street brand recognised that their job descriptions needed improvement, although they had made a start by applying a software tool to bring greater clarity, eliminate jargon and adopt more inclusive language. They had also engaged consultants with a view to drawing up practices that would widen their recruitment base:

*“What they were saying was… to make an inclusive experience, you really need the job description to be very specific, make sure that you've got really clear criteria. Over the years, we've just got a little bit lost from what the basics should be… we've just got to strip it back to keep it very simple. What's the nature of the job? What are the objectives and what are the criteria? And all this stuff around ‘essential’ and ‘desirable’, you shouldn't really be having those on your job descriptions. So, we're going through a bit of an education process internally but… we still need to do a lot more to get the right things pitched at the right level and to make sure we assess and select in a fair and inclusive way.” (E5)*

 E1, himself autistic and a major player in the company’s programme to attract autistic job seekers, advised recruitment managers on changes they might introduce that more closely reflect the actual role they are advertising:

*"Job descriptions must reflect the role - anything not related to the role should be removed. Your job description needs to be a proper job description. What are you looking for? And be specific. Don't say ‘great communicator’. That's not specific. If you're hiring a data project manager and you say, ‘great communicator’, what does that mean? What you actually mean is you want somebody who's able to interpret data and put that down onto a nice slide and give a description of how they've interpreted the data. If that is your version of a ‘great communicator’, then that's what you need to put in the job description. Not take it to too high a level, and say, ‘great communicator’ because for an autistic person, ‘great communicator’ means that I can stand up in front of a crowd and talk.” (E1)*

### 6.3.6 Situational Judgement Tests are likely to disadvantage autistic applicants

Situational judgement tests (SJTs) are a form of psychometric test that are increasingly used by employers to test the ‘job fitness’ of applicants, particularly for graduates, but also for entry level posts in retail and customer service (Patterson *et al.*, 2012). Often in the form of an online standardised test, or sometimes outsourced to agencies to conduct by telephone, these assessments ask candidates to consider a series of hypothetical workplace scenarios that they might encounter in the role for which they have applied, and to judge how they would respond to a particular dilemma. The scenario may involve a situation relating solely to the individual - for example, how to prioritise certain work demands - or where other members of a team or clients are involved, such as how to deal with a customer complaint. Typically, applicants must select one course of action from the multiple-choice question or, in some cases, rank the three or four options available. SJTs are used across a wide range of industries as a mandatory part of the assessment process, with success in them a prerequisite for interview. For the autistic job applicant, the particular barrier presented by this selection method is that it relies heavily on ‘Theory of Mind’ (**see chapter 2.3.1**) where the candidate has to conjure up scenarios of which they may have no experience and with limited information, rather than draw on past experience, in order to decide on a course of action. The literature refers to the difficulty for autistic candidates in responding to hypothetical questions (Smith *et al.*, 2021) but is limited in its examination of the central role played by SJTs in ‘filtering’ job applicants in the initial stages. In addition, access to ‘reasonable adjustments’ to obtain an alternative ‘test’ to which they are entitled is generally not offered or made transparent to applicants by employers.

The vast majority of autistic participants who had been exposed to SJTs said that they found them difficult or impossible to complete:

*“Where I've really failed with job interviews, although it's not quite an interview, was those situational judgement tests.” (A10)*

*“I fail those tests. I've applied for jobs at X, Y and Z (well-known high street brands) and if you give me an online test with those situational judgements, I always get them wrong. I just cannot get past those tests.” (A6)*

Having worked for a number of years in customer service with a railway company, A6 applied for a post as a train driver, having acquired a detailed working knowledge of the day-to-day requirements of the post through research and discussions with train drivers and other relevant personnel. He scored very highly in the other assessments but was eliminated following the situational judgement assessment:

*“For the train driver job, I got the highest ever score they've seen for verbal reasoning (99%) but then I got to the phone interview… and they were situational judgement tests where they gave me a scenario, and I had to say how I would respond … and they marked me on a preconceived set of criteria, whereas I was expecting to engage with train managers on a personal basis and talk about trains and procedures and processes. I couldn’t do that with the HR guy. He didn’t know anything about train procedures. He was marking this tick box and it just threw me… One of the questions was ‘You were due to start the train … and you're heading towards the cabin when you see an old lady struggling’… It's those artificial questions I struggle with. I think the filtering process means autistics just can't get through.” (A6)*

An independent mentor who works with autistic job seekers explained that the basis of these assessments was not conducive to the literal way in which many people on the autism spectrum think:

*“…we know that a lot of (autistic) people are black and white thinkers. It's concrete. If they haven't had that actual experience, then they don't have that social imagination so those tests are very difficult because.... it’s like asking hypothetical questions in an interview. What would you do in this situation? What's the best response? And a lot of those take being able to think about other people's situations, think about cause and effect which are, we know, some of the problems that people on the autism spectrum struggle with.” (S4)*

S4 went on to explain that it is not possible to make ‘reasonable adjustments’ to these psychometric tests to accommodate autistic people as by their very nature they are standardised:

*“It’s something that worries me... because I know the very nature of the assessments means that you can't put in adjustments… You can put in certain things like, I had a client a while ago… (who) could have his test in a room on his own so he wasn't distracted or overwhelmed by other people… and had a bit more time to read the directions... but there's very little you can do because the actual test has to be standardised.” (S4)*

A37, an engineer, had worked as a government scientist and, with the encouragement of her manager, applied for a new role in the same Department, for which she had to sit a number of tests, including a SJT. She said she scored in the 99th percentile for the maths test, scored highly in the reading comprehension but failed the SJT. She explained:

*“None of the questions were especially relevant to the role because… they were all about management, despite the fact I wouldn’t actually be managing anyone… I also had some very strong objections to them because they were multiple choice with ‘correct’ answers (but)… there wasn't an obvious, right answer … they were all potentially plausible answers in different situations. And particularly for neurodiverse people, what might work better for me might not be the same as what works better for someone else. I don't think that makes neurodiverse people objectively worse managers because people aren't distributed evenly across jobs. So, in an engineering environment, somebody who's good at managing neurodiverse people might actually be a better manager than someone who assumes everyone's neurotypical. So, I had some serious concerns about both what the correct answers were and the applicability of the questions for the role. There was no way to show your working and say I think this one would be best because of this. It’s just multiple choice...” (A37)*

With the help of her trade union, A37 appealed on the grounds that ‘reasonable adjustments’ should have been offered, such as a narrative response to the questions. Subsequently, she moved to the private sector but her case went forward to an employment tribunal contending that she had been subjected to discrimination arising from her disability and, in the end, the Department settled a few days before the tribunal.

In fact, the fairness of these tests in relation to those on the autism spectrum was challenged in 2017 at an Employment Appeal Tribunal (The Government Legal Service v Brookes). The Tribunal found that the Government Legal Service had indirectly discriminated against a candidate with Asperger’s Syndrome who had been required to take a SJT as part of their recruitment exercise process and was denied her request to answer the questions in the form of short narrative answers. It stated that the requirement “*placed the candidate at a particular disadvantage, by comparison with non-disabled candidates who did not have Asperger's*”, and noted that of the small number of those who had declared themselves as having autism or Asperger's, only one had ever passed the test. The tribunal ruled that:

*“The test is efficient in the sense that there are considered to be objectively right or wrong answers to each multiple-choice question, which means marking can be done by a computer without human intervention or judgment. But… the Government Legal Service should have granted her request to be allowed to answer the questions… in the form of short narrative written answers. The Tribunal found that the Respondent had indirectly discriminated against the Claimant, had failed to comply with the duty to make reasonable adjustments and had treated her unfavourably because of something arising in consequence of her disability”* (The Government Legal Service v Ms T Brookes: UKEAT/0302/16/RN, no date).

These cases draw attention to another important aspect in relation to SJTs, where the autistic candidate was hampered not by the inability to imagine a certain scenario but by the dearth or imprecision of the information available to them in order to recommend a particular course of action. They were quite capable of forming a judgement as to a particular course of action but argued that their response depended on knowing relevant facts that were not available to them in the short multiple-choice questions. Whilst this ruling clearly established that such tests may discriminate against those on the autism spectrum, there is no evidence that organisations in general have changed their recruitment processes in response to this ruling. In some instances, employers asserted that an alternative assessment to SJTs was possible but acknowledged that their online system did not make that clear to applicants beforehand, as in many cases ‘reasonable adjustments’ were not triggered until after the online test was completed. Some autistic candidates therefore were unaware of the ‘hypothetical’ nature of the tests until they had completed them and failed, and while some may have asked to be re-assessed, others will not have, unaware that such an option was open to them. A human resources manager for a leading high street brand explained the flaw in their current assessment process:

*“If a candidate, says, ‘Yes, I require a ‘reasonable adjustment’ and ticks the box that they have a disability, we (the team responsible for ‘reasonable adjustments’) still don’t see them until they’ve successfully completed the (SJT) testing in which case for a lot of candidates, that’s too late. They required an intervention before… we do find a lot of candidates, particularly autistic candidates will complete the test, perhaps be unsuccessful, and then contact us.” (E3)*

A27, who had held responsible posts in the education sector, spoke of the ‘humiliation’ and ‘discrimination’ of having to undergo these tests and to somehow adopt a neurotypical perspective of events when he is autistic:

*“I think actually they are a major point of discrimination and it’s actually quite humiliating in some ways because the problem is they're looking for a very specific type of person to fit within a role … They use a lot of psychometric tests, and … we're on a very different wavelength mentally … you've got the neurotypical perspective and you've got the autistic perspective and culture. To use an electrical term, you've got a digital versus an analogue signal. They're both transmitted the same way but they just don't read each other because how they're actually analysed and processed are completely different. And I reached the conclusion that being autistic… it's always going to be a situation of misunderstanding and a form of discrimination because… I process things, very, very differently. The truth is we just don't fit in.” (A27)*

S2, a trade union representative who is herself autistic, commented:

*“Situational judgement questions are outrageous. I’ve been working for this company for 24 years but I would have failed the (current) entry level test (comprising situational judgement questions).” (S2).*

E7, the recruitment manager for a well-known insurance company that receives some 30,000 job applications per annum, was sceptical about the effectiveness of this selection method, especially for entry level posts, and seemed more confident in his ability to assess an individual on meeting them in person:

*“… we worry about those entry level roles that by putting a situational judgement test into play we could lose out on those with potential. And so that's why we haven't really gone down that route, and for the other areas of the business, I'm just not convinced, I'm just sceptical that people talk about them like it's a bit of a silver bullet. They're going to get an insight into the real person and for me, I've yet to see a really successful situational judgement test where a good interviewer wouldn't be able to get a good insight and I … just like the personal touch really” (E7)*

When it came to the type of post for which autistic applicants might apply, he said there were no restrictions in his view on ‘job-fit’: *“We look at each individual with autism on their own merit” (E7)*. In his experience, however, autistic applicants had often found the noisy, fast-paced atmosphere of the contact centre much less appealing than ‘backroom’ positions where they might flourish:

*“People with autism tend not to settle too well into the contact centre environment because it's incredibly fast-paced. It's incredibly unpredictable. It's quite loud, it's quite energetic. There's lots of change in terms of policies and procedures and… those types of profiles aren't really conducive to somebody with autism. Not always, but it's a big business… so it's no good putting somebody like C (an autistic employee) into the Contact Centre. He would just absolutely hate it. So, the position needs to be right and conducive to their skill set.” (E7)*

Similarly, E1, who was involved in recruitment for a multinational investment bank, and was himself autistic, regarded autistic applicants as ideal for certain roles, particularly involving accuracy and reliability, although some of his comments arguably tended towards stereotyping:

*“They are very dependable at following processes. We're very rules driven. Processes are built in a certain way because we move huge volumes of money and they have to be moved right first time …. They (autistic employees) are very ‘right first time’, the productivity levels are so much right up there, if not outstripping (others). Our retention rates – those kinds of individuals who come in are very loyal so from a corporate perspective, there are exceptionally strong statistics for people on the spectrum coming in. We are not doing this for charity.” (E1)*

As explained in the previous chapter, autistic applicants can often find difficulty in navigating the conventional job interview, and have requested a closer match between the skills tested at the selection stage and the actual job in prospect. Employers generally acknowledged that these were not always a good match. E6, the Human Resources manager of a non-departmental public body, explained:

*“I would say in theory the interview should be just testing the skills as outlined in the job description, but I think the reality in our organisation is that some of the exercises that candidates are asked to do don't necessarily test the skills that are needed within the role. And I think my personal bugbear is asking people to prepare and deliver a presentation … where that isn't part of the role. And actually, what I've seen at X is that people are often testing the content of that presentation rather than the presentation skills… (so) probably we should be testing that in a different way.” (E6)*

Another important consideration when assessing autistic job applicants is that, unlike neurotypical counterparts, they are more likely to perform exceptionally well in some areas (see (Bölte, Dziobek and Poustka, 2009; Doyle, 2020) while doing much less well in others. This uneven performance is sometimes referred to as a ‘spiky’ profile. Autistic participants and employers commented that selection tests they were familiar with, often required a minimum score or gave equal weighting to a wide range of criteria, irrespective of the precise skills required for the post. Two employers had recognised the disadvantage to autistic applicants of these methods, and E6 said that they were looking to revise their criteria with appropriate weighting so that the most able candidate for the job, rather than the good ‘all-rounder’, was selected. Another employer, E3, said that they recognised the limitations of average scoring and were opposed to it but in a large organisation, change was sometimes resisted by the hiring managers:

*“We have fought for a long time not to average scoring because… we think everyone will end up on par so… we score each component separately. And then it's up to the hiring managers. So, there's not a pass mark and you don't have to get above a line to get the job, and the hiring manager looking at that information (might) say: ‘Everyone's really good in my team at this, and this candidate’s really poor. But that's okay because I know the rest of my team are good at it whereas this candidate has got this skill that's really important that my team don't have, therefore I'm going to employ them’. So, it's not necessarily the top scorer that wins and it's based on the skills gap needed. But that can be a hard message because some of our managers just want to… take the person who scores the most. But that's not necessarily the best fit for that role at that time, and so we do have that battle.” (E3)*

## 6.4 Person-organisation fit (P-O fit)

Whilst Person-job fit (P- J fit) is a common method for selecting job applicants, some employers favour what is known as person-organisation fit (P-O fit) where greater emphasis is placed on the applicant’s compatibility with an organisation’s culture, aims and ethos rather than with a specific job (Sekiguchi, 2004). Supporters of P-O fit argue that general cognitive ability is more important than a specific P-J fit, and that employers should select job applicants who share the values and visions of the organisation (Bowen, Ledford and Nathan, 1991). Additionally, some maintain that assessments based on P-J fit alone fail to take account of the changing nature of work, where teamwork and flexibility should also be important factors in recruitment (Sekiguchi, 2004). However, while a high level of P-O fit is reported to produce a number of positive outcomes, such as job satisfaction and organisational cohesiveness, this approach may also have negative outcomes, such as limiting diversity and the potential to broaden a company’s perspective (Powell, 1998). The challenges for an autistic job applicant in meeting the requirements of P-O fit, and the views of employers on hiring autistic employees, are considered below. In addition, the impact of the increased use of Artificial Intelligence - another tool for gauging P-O fit - to screen candidates at the early stages of application is examined in relation to autistic job seekers.

### 6.4.1 Most autistic participants reflected on whether they would ‘fit in’ with the organisation before applying for a job

Most autistic participants took into account the perceived values and ethos of an organisation before applying for a job. In A16’s case the decision whether or not to apply centred on broader ethical considerations, rather than the perceived attitude of the organisation towards autistic employees:

 *“I would have huge ethical difficulties working for a tobacco company, having lost my mother to lung cancer, or another controversial company like that.” (A16)*

The majority of participants, however, focused on whether they would ‘fit in’ as an autistic person. In order to ascertain their perceptions of different sectors, participants were asked whether - based on past experience of interviews and, where applicable, employment - they regarded the public, private or third sector as more inclusive of those on the autism spectrum. Given the high degree of regulation, and the fact that the majority of employers who have subscribed to the Disability Confident Employer Scheme are in the public sector (www.gov.uk, no date), participants might have been expected to favour this sector. But whilst a minority were firmly in favour of the public sector: “*I’ve always tended to focus on the public sector or charities*” (A4), responses overall were more complex and mixed.

A number of participants viewed the public sector as a more ‘protective’ environment where they felt at ease, and their needs were better catered for:

*“I’ve noticed the public sector is a lot better at people with autism, a lot more understanding. I've also applied for jobs for Councils, and actually the first thing when you go on to the job description, it talks about being an equal kind of opportunity. And it's not just a statement at the end of the application, like maybe on a third party or private company. It's actually, you know, please email us, here's the lead contact for this job application if you need to speak to somebody about this… They invited you to fill in the information and I thought okay, I'm going to because normally they don't go into as much detail, such as what they have in place to help you. And that was really reassuring for me because if they're actually saying this is what we can do to help, then they are likely to probably take somebody on with this …” (A10)*

Similarly, A18 believed there was a greater ‘understanding’ of her autism in her current public sector post and contrasted it with her experience of attending an interview in the ‘corporate’ sector:

*“I do think that there is a difference (between the public and private sector) because some jobs that I've applied for have been with large organisations. And when I did comment to my daughter that I went for an interview and I didn't get on very well, she said it was probably too ‘corporate’. I mean the NHS office that I work in… is a large organisation with a lot of people but they have an understanding.” (A18)*

Whilst A40 expressed a similar preference for the public sector, which she regarded as a *“safer”* working environment, she acknowledged that a key element was the attitude of the manager and fellow workers, rather than the sector:

*“I think it depends who you're working with, which staff in many ways. I think probably the private sector is a bit more cut-throat. I tend to go for more public roles or I have recently looked at charity roles. I think it's probably safer to apply for jobs where, you know, you're welcomed, no matter what disabilities you have, or maybe they already employ people on the spectrum. But on the other hand, you can find jobs where you get on very well with the manager and they explain things to you clearly, and it's fine.” (A40)*

In contrast, A7, who had spent most of his career in industry, believed that the private sector was better at developing individual talent to the mutual advantage of employer and employee. He contrasted his career in industry with the management in a hospital where he now volunteered:

*“In the private sector, you'll probably get more adjustments than you would do in the public sector or a hospital. It's strange but in the hospital, people stereotype you whereas if you work for an industry like X (his former employer) sometimes they pick up on your natural instinct and use that to your advantage and their advantage… they tap into your interest and use your interest to help them and help you. They're more interested in the end product.” (A7)*

For A37, the public sector’s reliance on standardised testing such as Situational Judgement Tests, rather than assessing the applicant’s job skills, was seen as a negative factor (although SJTs are also found in the private sector):

*“The big thing that makes the public-private sector difference is those b\*\*\*\*\* situational judgement tests. They are endemic... and I think I'd really struggle to get a job in the civil service now because these weird behavioural competencies where neurotypical is best are just so baked into the recruitment process, whereas the private sector are more interested in whether you're actually good at your job.” (A37)*

One participant’s attitude to the public sector had been affected negatively by the experiences of a family member:

*“It's a bit tricky because I used to think probably the public sector would be best. But my mum worked for the NHS and she ended up taking a disability discrimination case against them… she doesn't have autism, she has a physical health condition, but it was quite shocking the basic equality thing, they just sort of disregarded it. She won in the end but it was very stressful for her.” (A45)*

A36’s experience of working in the public sector had not been good but she acknowledged that it may not be typical of the sector as a whole:

*“I think having had the experience that I have, working in the school because that was the Council, that's the public sector, I would say that's tainted my belief in them that they would support someone with autism because they are supposed to be inclusive and in that case they clearly weren't. But I don't necessarily think that means everyone in the public sector is the same, it might just have been a bad experience there. And I don't know.” (A36)*

Interestingly, one participant suggested that the choice of sector for autistic people depended on whether or not the individual had received a formal diagnosis. Like most of the autistic participants, A10 had been diagnosed as an adult and, having commented positively on the public sector, went on to say that, without a diagnosis, he would take a different view:

*“I can see why some people with autism say the public sector is worse than the private sector because they are very rigid, and if you don't fall into the category to provide support, then you're kind of fighting for the support you need and want. If you don't have a diagnosis, the private sector is probably much better because they don't look at what diagnosis you have, and what does it say on our chart about this? It's more treating you as a person. But actually, I found a public sector with the diagnosis of autism is a lot better because they do have policies and procedures in place under The Autism Act, and they were saying all of the things that they would do to help me within the job which I've not had from private employers as much.” (A10)*

Person-organisation fit may go far beyond the ‘values’ or ‘ethics’ of an organisation when employers are considering applicants, and tend more to homophily (where individuals are more likely to favour those of a similar class, race or disposition). When asked about the public versus private sector, a number of participants gave accounts of how the assessment of whether an individual was considered a ‘good fit’ for an organisation had operated in practice. A20, who is autistic and also a regular member of selection panels in his organisation, reflected on the attitude of some of his colleagues, who formed the view that a certain applicant might not ‘fit in’ as part of a team:

*“I've had people that I line manage who do recruitment and have fed back about a candidate who has dyspraxia who, I would say, is someone that I've met before and she has sort of a non-traditional communication style. I thought it was great that she'd come to interview with us, but the people didn't select her and said that she didn't seem quite right and that she would be a ‘poor team’ fit. They couldn't really specify why they didn't think that she quite had the skills for the job.” (A20)*

Similarly, for one post that involved job-sharing, A20 recalled that panel members discussed how well they judged the applicant would get on with their co-worker:

*“Team fit comes up a lot (in selection) and I think we're starting to talk about that because we do ‘unconscious bias’ training… but you get lots of people that are old school and… they'll say, ‘Oh well, it's a job, sure, but I'm trying to picture how they're going to work with so and so.’ And you think, ‘Well that's not in the job description. ‘Needing to work with so and so’ isn't one of the criteria.’” (A20)*

It is clear from the above comments that an autistic job applicant, who is likely to present differently from neurotypical applicants in terms of eye contact, facial expressions, posture and verbal communication (see **2.6.2** above), may be disadvantaged by such a personalised approach to selection.

### 6.4.2 The ‘culture’ rather than the sector of an organisation is more important

The personal accounts in **6.4.1** above indicate that autistic participants had in some cases polarised views of the same sector. While for some, the public sector was ‘understanding’ and ‘comforting’, for others it ‘lacked accountability’ and did not maximise people’s talents. An alternative view from S5, a labour market intermediary who had supported autistic people into employment for more than 20 years, was that the organisational culture of an entity, rather than the sector in which it operated, was key to whether an autistic individual would ‘fit in’:

*“… it’s a question of organisational culture. You can have firms working in the same sectors who have very, very different attitudes.” (S5)*

These views were supported by S4, a coach and mentor of autistic job applicants, who also stressed the importance of good line management:

*“I think culture is really important and… the right line manager, that's the thing that makes the real difference. So, some people may benefit from being in a very small organisation where everyone knows each other and you're accepted very much as to who you are as an individual. And then maybe those sorts of small start-ups or businesses can be quite flexible in terms of the way the role is developed. But on the other hand, you can be in a large organisation but because they've got the resources, the structures, the frameworks, potentially the resources, the money, then those things can bring huge benefits for individuals. I think it's just what's needed for the individual. And I think the main thing is that they're getting into the right role in the right physical environment with the right line manager. It's those things that are important, not that it should be public sector or charity.” (S4)*

A44, a highly-qualified graduate who had struggled to find suitable full-time employment and was currently in part-time work, said:

*“I think a lot of it has to do with the individual culture of the institution, and the personalities of the line manager and the HR manager, and just how understanding they are as human beings, really.” (A44)*

Similarly, A42, who had worked in the criminal justice system, was of the view that the management and colleagues you worked with were the determining factors in whether you were suited to a particular organisation:

*“It’s the people, it's not until you see the people that you know (if you fit in).” (A42)*

Employers in both the public and private sector commented that whilst their organisation might have a publicly stated commitment to diversity and equality, the personal preferences, not to say prejudices, of recruiters could sometimes be the deciding factors in whether an individual was hired. E4, who worked in the Human Resources department of a large government organisation, acknowledged that although as an employer they subscribed to the principles of inclusivity and fairness, individual preferences might prevail on some interview panels:

*“I would say that the culture and philosophy of X (the employer) overall is very positive and inclusive, and we wouldn't and shouldn't discriminate. However, I think it's down to individuals. It’s people, isn’t it? It's the managers' own preferences. You get excellent, wonderfully supportive managers, and we get some that aren’t. And I think it's very much down to, unfortunately, who you get on the day.” (E4)*

A20, who had worked mainly in the public sector, was keen to see a more positive attitude from panels, where they focused on the ‘unique’ attributes an autistic individual applicant might bring to that organisation rather than – along the lines of the ‘medical model’ - the ‘reasonable adjustments’ that might arise in order for that individual to ‘fit in’ with the status quo. Like others, he spoke of the need for the ‘culture’ rather than the sector, to be right:

*“… it does come down to the culture in terms of the work, the approach to work-life balance and flexibility. One would assume that the public sector would have to be more open and accommodating but even so the public sector can also be incredibly rigid about expectations of staff, and approach to management, and some are bureaucratic. And I would say the key thing…is the degree to which a prospective employer thinks about disability and autism from a medical perspective, so the focus is on ‘reasonable adjustments’, the focus is on the condition. And I would be much more interested in an employer that said, ‘We're autism friendly. We care about our people and we want to develop them and take more of a strengths-based approach. So, the starting point is not what's wrong with you that we need to help you with; rather, how can we get the best from you and what will be your unique contribution to our organisation?’ I think that feels better as a starting point for a company I would actually want to go and work for. And I think you see that with some of the big companies that have done neurodiversity type schemes where they are actually seeking to draw on the unique talents and skills from people whose brains work differently, as opposed to having to manage them, to kind of fit in with the rest of the culture.” (A20)*

The openness of the culture of an organisation played a significant part in enabling autistic job seekers to gain employment. Sometimes autistic applicants might have tried all the usual entry routes but succeeded only when they took an unconventional approach or were facilitated by an open-minded employer. One such employer explained how an autistic maths graduate gained a position with his company:

*“C’s father wrote to us and said his son has a first-class master’s in pure mathematics. However, he's unable to secure a position anywhere … so I met up with C and his father. I had a conversation with him. He's quite withdrawn in himself but at the same time he's a mathematical genius. So, we introduced C to some of the senior managers within our pricing and analytical departments. And we gave C a six-week work placement within that area, just purely crunching numbers, recognizing patterns and trends in pricing conditions and things like that. He got on really well and they put C into a full-time position … he's a full-time senior data analyst now… He's been here for about three years and he's really so settled in, he’s loving his job.” (E7)*

Another employer, a multinational investment bank, had run a programme aimed at autistic recruits for several years following the realisation that would-be autistic job applicants had lost confidence in large companies (including his own). Their programme was therefore designed to bring on board the pool of talent that they believed they had been missing out on through previous hiring processes:

*“It's a good thing to do because of some very talented people that we're not hiring, purely because they've been overlooked for years and they're not approaching us anymore. They don't approach large companies because their perception is that our hiring processes don't work for them. We need to up our game and change some of our processes to make them more accessible. But equally, we need to get out there into the community and let them know we are looking and excited to hire people and we are working hard to make all processes accessible to them. We made sure that our recruiters, our hiring managers are all trained in a different way and are very open and receptive to looking at skills set correctly for the job, and taking away the social elements of the hiring process, if you like.” (E1)*

The same participant went on to explain the philosophy of the company regarding the benefits, rather than perceived disadvantages, of diversity in the workplace:

*“From a team dynamics perspective, what we want is a diverse team, having diverse thoughts and backgrounds and inputs into the way we do things. Our demographic has to mirror that of our clients. And within our clients, you're going to have people on the spectrum, people with neurodiverse backgrounds, people from different ages, cultures, etc… so our team should mirror that.” (E1)*

Similar comments were made by another private sector company, a high street retailer, referring to the need for ‘culture add’, by aiming to attract those who were not currently represented in the company so as to harness new ideas and better reflect the different groups in society, although their current recruitment processes did not always match this aspiration. E1’s company, on the other hand, did outreach work with other employers to dispel some of the ‘myths’ surrounding the hiring of autistic people and stressed the importance of ‘a culture of acceptance’:

*“I think there's a lot of misconception around how difficult people on the spectrum could be to manage or to fit into an organisation. People worry about their integration, their acceptance from colleagues; and that’s down to each company's culture. And if they’re worried about that, then my directive to them is perhaps the first thing you want to work on is your culture. Do some training, do some myth busting. We’re a large company but we have it from the top down that our culture is about being neurodiverse, everybody feeling included. It’s about a culture of acceptance.” (E1)*

### 6.4.3 The use of Artificial Intelligence in the selection process is likely to disadvantage autistic applicants in relation to P-O fit

As noted in the paragraphs above, many companies, particularly in retail and customer services, employed technology to screen applicants at the preliminary stages of recruitment. Existent research has already identified that companies use a range of methods including psychometric tests, computer games or online questionnaires to assess candidates before involving human resources (Cheng and Hackett, 2021). They are particularly favoured by companies with a very high volume of applications. Where applicants fail these initial tests, rejection is usually immediate and no feedback is given.

More recently, technology has been applied in a more sophisticated way with many leading companies using robots to perform initial interviews to determine whether candidates should proceed to the next round (Bogen and Rieke, 2018; Buranyi, 2018). As explained in **2.6.4** above, some organisations will operate video-recorded interviews, using an actor or a graphic with a pre-recorded voice; and algorithms will scan the results to identify ‘suitable’ candidates (Dishman, 2018). The technology may analyse not only the content and presentation of the responses but also ‘micro expressions’ such as the frequency of frowning, blinking or smiling, the amount of eye contact, as well as assessing posture and body language (Turner, 2018). Additionally, however, the candidate may be assessed against an ideal construct comprising those qualities most valued by that organisation and demonstrated by their ‘star’ employees (Turner, 2018).

The application of such software has in some cases reinforced existing stereotypes, and in particular bias against women where, for example, the artificial intelligence has drawn on data in high-tech industries that have been largely populated by males (Dastin, 2018). It is possible, therefore, that in seeking an ideal ‘fit’ for the organisation, the end result is, as one participant argued, *“a socially homogenous workforce produced by algorithms”* (S2)*.* At the very least, it raises questions as to how such a mechanistic approach to selecting candidates might disadvantage those who fall outside the neurotypical parameters set by the algorithm, particularly those who display autistic characteristics. A27, who had worked successfully in IT but experienced failure when undergoing algorithm-based selection procedures, likened them to a photocopier where employers were seeking to replicate exact “copies” of employees who fitted the company mould:

*“I used to use search software and they used algorithms to search computers for malicious content. But the thing is… algorithms are used too much in the way of a photocopier. You press a button and out comes a candidate… and I think it is actually taking out autistic people altogether because the algorithm never factors in disability.” (A27)*

The lack of transparency regarding the composition of the software – which some have referred to as a ‘black box’- also impacts on ‘reasonable adjustments’ for applicants. One employment mentor highlighted an important issue for autistic people when applying to different companies, each of which might be using bespoke software to reflect their desired candidate profile:

*“We do not know the ‘reasonable adjustments’ to ask for with the AI job interview because we don't yet know really what's going on out there, and it's not just one platform. This is hundreds of different iterations of it.” (S7)*

E5, a multinational retailer, confirmed that this form of selection was used for their graduate programme but their Head of Diversity and Inclusion was unaware of the composition of the software, and consequently its potential for discrimination.

One autistic applicant confirmed that the lack of transparency in such an interview impacted negatively on her job application. A35 described an experience where the selection process involved artificial intelligence, and she was unclear about what ‘reasonable adjustments’ she could have requested. Only by raising her concerns and subsequently being offered a face-to-face interview did she succeed in her application:

*“There was quite a structured recruitment process, which was all remote video. So, I mean, it was fairly hideous really. It was all done by video link … and it was only in the later stages of the process that there was a real person involved … in hindsight, I understand that I could at an early stage have asked for an interview with a real person instead of the remote assessment as a ‘reasonable adjustment’, but that wasn't sufficiently clear to me. So, in fact, the first time I was unsuccessful in the process and it was only after I appealed, feeling that I hadn't had a fair crack of the whip in terms of the adjustments and the equality process, that they then suggested that I applied again and asked for this reasonable adjustment, which I did do. And I had a real, remote interview with a person and eventually that resulted in a job offer. But I did have to assert my rights to fair treatment under the Equality Act.” (A35)*

When A35 was tested using AI methods, she failed. But when offered ‘reasonable adjustments’ that did not involve AI, she passed. This case would therefore appear to support the argument that artificial intelligence devices that are engineered to give preferential treatment to the neurotypical population (and, more precisely, to certain subsets within that group) are likely to have an adverse effect on the outcome for autistic applicants whose presentation and delivery will fail to match the desired performance. As S7 (above) argued, in order to achieve a fairer process, greater transparency is needed about such methods, as well as clearer communication to autistic applicants about the ‘reasonable adjustments’ available to them.

Although the use of artificial intelligence is increasingly common, particularly among large organisations that would like to reduce their recruitment costs by rapidly processing large numbers of applicants (Rodney, Valaskova and Durana, 2019), two major organisations who participated in the research expressed their opposition to them. The human resources manager of one high street retailer said:

*“We've seen it and have considered it in the past but we have yet to find software that we think will deliver what we need without having an adverse impact on our candidates.” (E3)*

Similarly, the recruitment manager of a large insurance company believed that it was likely to screen out some candidates who would do well in their organisation:

*“As long as I’m in recruitment, I don't think we'll go down that route and it does worry me the whole sort of artificial intelligence because I get emails probably about three or four times a day from companies thinking you can decrease your time to hire by this much by using AI. But I think there’s one thing that we're quite proud of, and that's something that we get regular feedback about, is our personalised approach… I’m sure companies will pay the price for it at some point.” (E7)*

### 6.4.4 Some organisations may suggest alternatives to the job applied for if applicants are a P-O fit

The nature of P-O fit is that greater importance is placed on the qualities and values of the individual - and how they are seen to fit into the culture of an organisation - and rather less on how they match up to any specific person specification or job description (Kristof, 1996; Rivera, 2012). Consequently, having assessed an individual’s compatibility with the company, an employer may suggest an alternative post to that for which the applicant applied. A large insurance company spoke of their approach when assessing autistic applicants, and the options available if the intended post was deemed unsuitable:

*“We would rather get a better grasp of, ‘What's their integrity? What are their morals? Are they polite?’... We identify those with autism at the front end of the process. And we try our best to make that process more comfortable for them if we don't feel that they're suitable for the position that they're applying for, rather than leading them to a path of being unsuccessful for that role. We'll try and find something alternative within the business which is a lot more suitable to their skills and their condition. We also do a lot of work with X, a local charity, and if they've got somebody who they think would be suitable to work for us… we meet with them, have a conversation, find out about what their skills are, what their experiences are. And again, we'll put a bespoke service together to try and find them somewhere in the business that would be suitable for them.” (E7)*

Another employer described a similar approach to assessing an applicant’s compatibility with the company: less emphasis was placed on formal qualifications (although many were highly qualified) and more on the knowledge and enthusiasm that the individual displayed, which in turn were strong indicators of where they might thrive in the organisation:

*“What is their interest? What do they do with their time that keeps them upskilled? I'd much rather hire somebody who's so interested in an area that they work on it every night. They teach themselves new skills. They really are able to talk of an interest and have a passion for it.” (E1)*

One participant related that he had been offered a different position from the one he had sought. A10 had applied for a customer service job in the retail sector and, although he was not successful in that, the company suggested he try a sister company, based on the results of his application tests:

*“They said ‘Your answers were much more organisational and we think you would fit our partner company’ (a chain of coffee shops), which I found really good… I would like to see that more, kind of treating you as an individual. Businesses could offer different roles within a business. So, let's say I applied to work on the trains etc. I know I wouldn't be a very good train driver, but I know that my skills would be better at working in the ticket shop or something. So even though these skills might not work for the exact job you've applied for, they might actually be very good for some other part of the business.” (A10)*

The possibility of hiring someone in a different role from the one they had applied for was mentioned in a number of cases but exclusively in relation to the private sector, where hiring managers appeared to have greater flexibility and fewer budgetary constraints. E6, who had worked in the private sector and was now the Human Resources manager of a non-departmental public body, commented:

*“I used to work in management consultancy and actually we would sometimes just create a role for somebody because we'd think they're absolutely great but they're not quite right for the role that we've advertised. Whereas obviously, we don't have that flexibility at the moment and X (the employer) is very much focused on, ‘Can they do that job?’ If we thought they were great and we had another vacancy coming up, we would encourage them to apply but they would go back to the beginning, they wouldn't be a shoo in for that, they would… go through that process again.” (E6)*

### 6.4.5 Where recruitment was outsourced, employers did not monitor whether their policies on diversity and inclusion were followed

Two of the larger organisations used agencies to carry out the initial screening, usually for more senior posts. A shortlist of candidates would be drawn up and then submitted to the employer for the final rounds of assessment. The literature shows that there is a propensity for hiring agents to discriminate against autistic applicants (Ameri *et al.*, 2018; Mai, 2019). Employers were therefore asked whether they had in place a process by which they could assure themselves that their own policies and practices on diversity and inclusion were followed in cases where agencies undertook the initial ‘sifting’. The HR representative from a large retail organisation responsible for assessment could not confirm that this was done:

*“Specifically on inclusion in the process - I wouldn't be confident saying we do that. I hadn't considered that… but I don't think we do anything on that.” (E3)*

Similarly, the Head of Diversity and Inclusion at another high street brand admitted that more needed to be done to ensure consistency of standards across their various hiring agents:

*“We are going through a review of our disability aspects of the inclusion and diversity strategy… because we know that we're not good enough in certain aspects and we've got to get much clearer, and the recruitment process and experience is going to be one of our priorities. One thing that we will do is a reset with all of the agencies that we work with around the standards that we expect, and that will include things like the quality of the shortlist that they put through… We've got a lot more to do to learn around how we become more accessible to people with different abilities, whether it be people with autism or coming from a more neurodivergent background.” (E5)*

## 6.5 Summary

This chapter has examined the challenges faced by autistic job applicants in relation to stereotyping, person-job fit (P-J fit) and person-organisation fit (P-O fit). In respect of stereotyping, autistic participants reported various aspects they had encountered from employers at job interviews or while in employment. Some employers, whose knowledge of autism was derived from the media, appeared to be influenced by ‘Rain Man’, the 1980s film depicting an autistic savant. Certain impressions that flowed from that characterisation were that autistic people were always male, had learning difficulties, lacked a sense of humour or were ‘gifted’ in some respect, usually in mathematics or scientific subjects. In some instances, where employers knew a relative or a previous employee with autism, they assumed that other autistic applicants would exhibit the same traits, strengths and weaknesses. A further concerning consequence of this form of stereotyping was that those who did not conform to the ‘expected’ profile - particularly females but also some males - could arouse suspicion that their diagnosis was not genuine, and that they might therefore be ‘attention-seeking’ or ‘playing the system’.

Employers acknowledged the complexity of the condition, and in some instances expressed their willingness to make the interview process more accessible for autistic people but were unsure what precise steps to take. In addition, while most had in place guidelines to avoid stereotyping at the selection stage, several admitted that much depended on the interviewer on the day, and that it was not possible to guarantee that stereotyping would not enter into the selection panel’s decisions when interviewing an autistic applicant. Furthermore, where the initial stages of recruitment were outsourced to agencies, there was a failure to monitor that the employer’s own policies on diversity and inclusion were adhered to.

In relation to person-job fit, the interviews probed two specific areas that autistic job applicants found challenging at the early stages of the application process and hampered their ability to decide whether they were a good ‘job-fit’: the person specification/ job description and situational judgement tests. In the case of the former, many autistic participants cited them as one of the barriers to applying for positions. The often-lengthy form of the document, the use of jargon or ‘buzzwords’, the need to distinguish between the ‘essential’ and ‘desirable’ elements of the post (where these were not clearly stated) and the common stipulation of ‘good communication skills’ were typical challenges faced by participants. Consequently, their decision as to whether they were a good ‘job-fit’ was hampered by the inaccessibility of the document and their difficulty in understanding the competencies necessary for the job.

The increased use of online situational judgement tests to gauge the suitability of job applicants for a particular position posed a particular challenge for autistic job seekers, who often lacked the capacity to conjure up scenarios of which they had no experience - in contrast to drawing on *past* experience - to decide on a course of action. For most autistic participants, they were a major obstacle to navigating the hiring process. Such practices clearly placed autistic people at a disadvantage and some employers also questioned their effectiveness - as opposed to their efficiency - in selecting candidates. Although many organisations with a high volume of interest relied on them for reducing applications to a ‘manageable’ number, several employers, including a major insurance company with some 30,000 applications per annum, questioned their ultimate effectiveness in selecting the best candidates. Most employers, while not excluding the possibility of hiring autistic people in different capacities, spoke of certain jobs to which they were well ‘fitted’. In particular, employers with significant experience of hiring autistic people spoke of observed strengths such as attention to detail, a high level of focus and facility with complex data that made them excellent employees in banking, insurance and financial services. Such observations confirmed to a certain extent the stereotypical view of autistic people and were a source of frustration to those applying for jobs in the creative, teaching and caring professions who felt that their competencies in these areas were less well recognised, and indeed questioned by employers. An important consideration when assessing autistic applicants for any form of work is the ‘spiky’ profile of many candidates who, unlike their neurotypical counterparts, may perform exceptionally well in some areas but poorly in others. Employers acknowledged that selection tests often required a minimum score or gave equal weighting to a wide range of criteria, irrespective of the precise skills required for the post. Consequently, they needed to revise their criteria with appropriate weighting so that the most able candidate for the job, rather than the good ‘all-rounder’, was selected.

Regarding person-organisation fit, most autistic participants said that they reflected on whether they would ‘fit in’ with an organisation before applying for a job but had differing views on whether a particular sector - public, private or third - would be more positive in their attitude to autistic candidates. While for some the public sector was ‘understanding’ and ‘comforting', for others it ‘lacked accountability’ and problems that arose were sometimes not dealt with in a timely fashion. Generally, the private sector was seen to operate more flexibly, providing opportunities for employment, while the public sector could be hampered by rigid processes and budgetary constraints. Labour market intermediaries, who were experienced in supporting autistic people job seekers into employment, argued that the organisational culture of an entity, rather than the sector in which it operated, was key to whether an autistic individual would ‘fit in’. In this context ‘culture’ was interpreted more as the day-to-day management and ambience of the work environment rather than the declared goals and guiding principles of an organisation. In their view, both positive and negative attitudes might be found in the same sector, and indeed the same organisation, and the most critical determinant of successful placement of autistic job seekers was an open-minded approach from the manager and work colleagues.

The use of artificial intelligence to screen out candidates in the early stages of the application process raised a number of serious concerns regarding the fairness of this method of selection for autistic applicants. The algorithms that were used derive from data drawn from neurotypical candidates and, reportedly, from ‘ideal’ employees that the organisation was seeking to replicate. As the detailed components of the software were bespoke and unavailable to candidates, it was not possible for autistic candidates to request ‘reasonable adjustments’ that would create a more level playing field when undergoing this assessment. Where alternatives were available, clearer communication was needed to inform autistic applicants of their right to request a different form of assessment.

The defining principle of person-organisation fit is that greater weight is given to an individual’s compatibility with the culture and ethics of an organisation rather than their perfect fit for a particular job. In this respect both applicants and employers, albeit only in the private sector, cited cases where a candidate was judged as unsuited to the post for which they had applied but were offered an alternative position in the company.

In summary, the findings indicate that autistic people, compared with their neurotypical counterparts, face a range of systemic barriers to employment in respect of stereotyping, person-job and person-organisation fit. Employers may have certain expectations of their abilities or limitations, and in some cases even question their diagnosis. Further, the application process involves the navigation of often lengthy, inexact and sometimes misleading job descriptions which hamper their ability to establish the essential competencies required for the job. Situational judgement tests, which are commonly used in the preliminary stages of selection, are often a major challenge to the autistic mind. Other forms of screening, such as artificial intelligence methods, are similarly based on the neurotypical mind and - because the specific algorithms are not openly declared - do not lend themselves to the ‘reasonable adjustments’ that may be needed for the autistic applicant.

# Chapter 7: Discussion

## 7.1 Introduction

This study set out to explore the influences, and interrelationship, of impression management, stereotyping and person-job/ person-organisation fit on outcomes for autistic job applicants, with particular reference to the selection process. Further, in the light of those findings, the research considered whether an alternative form of assessment would be fairer and more effective for this group of applicants. In addition to impression management, stereotyping, person-job fit and person-organisation fit, the critical framework (**chapter 3**) identified generative mechanisms that may be applicable to groups other than autistic people, such as the sectoral distribution of the labour market, changes in recruitment methods that increasingly rely on AI techniques, and austerity measures.

The literature review confirmed very high levels of unemployment and underemployment among autistic people, including graduates, despite their express wish and ability to work (National Autistic Society, 2018; Allen and Coney, 2021). Existent research also showed that the traditional job interview, with its emphasis on social skills and neurotypical behaviour, was a major barrier for autistic people seeking employment, given their difficulties in social communication and interaction (Ryan and Wessel, 2008; Bross *et al.*, 2021)). Studies on autistic people’s experience of job interviews have, however, tended to follow the ‘medical model’ of disability, where researchers have identified those areas where autistic individuals fall short of the neurotypical performance expected, and seek to address them by changing the individual’s behaviour (Strickland, Coles and Southern, 2013; Dechsling *et al.*, 2021). Success in these areas remains unproven, however, as there is no evidence to date that learned behaviour and responses to set questions can be generalised to ‘normal’ job interviews with employment outcomes (Nordahl-Hansen *et al.*, 2020; Smith *et al.*, 2021). Critically, there has been little consideration of the possible alternatives to the conventional interview to assess the autistic individual’s suitability to a post.

Within the literature review, three key influences were identified in relation to the selection of autistic job applicants: impression management, stereotyping and person-job/ person-organisation fit. The first of these – impression management – was examined in the context of Goffman’s account of symbolic interaction. His contention was that individuals are able to adapt and adjust their behaviour to engage with a particular audience (Goffman, 1959), such as a job applicant interacting with their interviewer(s). In such a scenario there is an expectation that individuals have an understanding of the ‘social norms’ and are able to enact them. However, given the innate profile of autism and the related difficulties of ‘Theory of Mind’ (see **2.3.1** above), this study set out to explore the unique position of autistic job seekers in relation to Goffman’s supposition.

Secondly, the study examined the concept of stereotyping as it applied to autistic applicants. The influence of bias in recruiting and selecting job applicants has been considered in relation to age, gender and race but much less is known about the impact on those with a disability, and specifically those with autism (Lipton *et al.*, 1991; King *et al.*, 2006; Posthuma and Campion, 2009). Moreover, in recent years autism has received much greater, although not necessarily balanced, exposure in the media (Pesonen *et al.*, 2021) with the result that - unusually - preconceptions about the suitability of autistic people in the workplace may be positive or negative, depending on their perceived skills. For example, autistic job seekers may be perceived to be proficient in IT and science-based subjects, and therefore better suited to related industries. This in turn raises the question of the degree to which stereotyping might permeate an employer’s assessment of an autistic applicant in relation to theories of person-job fit and person-organisation fit. In the case of the former, the skills and profile of an applicant are matched against the job specification (Sekiguchi, 2004; Kim, Schuh and Cai, 2020); and in the latter, compatibility of the individual with an organisation’s culture, aims and ethos is the main determinant for hiring (Kristof, 1996; Rivera, 2012).

Against this background, this study sought to address gaps in knowledge by exploring with autistic participants, employers and professional stakeholders both the barriers presented by the selection process and, perhaps more importantly, alternative forms of assessment that would enable autistic applicants to demonstrate their ability to perform the job description. The analysis of data produced seven key findings (**chapters 5 and 6**). Firstly, most autistic job applicants were conscious of the need to adopt or adapt certain behaviours to ‘impress’ at interview, referring even to ‘performing’, ‘going on stage’ or being part of a ‘pantomime’ but often were unable to conform to Goffman’s expected ‘presentation of self’ due to their autistic traits. Secondly, autistic participants had been exposed to a variety of stereotyping, including a belief that autistic people were exclusively male, had a learning disability or were ‘gifted’ in some respect. In some instances, employers appeared to display a form of ‘transference’ whereby, if they were acquainted with a relative or a previous employee with autism, they assumed that all autistic applicants would exhibit exactly the same traits, strengths and weaknesses. The third finding was that most employers acknowledged the complexity of the autistic condition and in a number of cases expressed their willingness to make the selection process more accessible for autistic people but were unsure, and sometimes misguided, when considering the precise strategy to adopt. The fourth finding (**chapter 6**) identified that Situational Judgement Tests (SJTs), which were used by many companies as the first level of screening to gauge the person-job fit of applicants, were often a major obstacle for autistic candidates. Since they relied on the ability to judge hypothetical scenarios, they posed a particular challenge for those who lacked ‘Theory of Mind’. Similarly, the fifth finding highlighted the increased use of video artificial intelligence to assess candidates for person-organisation fit in the early stages of the application process, raising concerns regarding its fairness in relation to autistic candidates. The algorithms, which were derived from data drawn from neurotypical candidates, were bespoke and unavailable to autistic applicants - similar to a ‘black box’ - so candidates were unable to request ‘reasonable adjustments’ to create a more level playing field when undergoing these assessments. Sixth, it was found that generally the private sector operated more flexibly - particularly in relation to work trials - when assessing autistic candidates for employment, while the public sector could be hampered by rigid processes and budgetary constraints. Finally, autistic job applicants stated that they would prefer a more task-related assessment, in particular a form of work trial, as a fairer and more effective means of judging their suitability to a job.

In this chapter, six main themes arising from the findings are explored to demonstrate how they support, contradict or extend the published literature. Section **7.2** shows how the qualitative data contribute to the literature on impression management in relation to autistic people and job interviews, with particular reference to Goffman’s dramaturgical model and theory of ‘presentation of self’. The analysis of the recruitment experiences of autistic applicants also contributes toward an advanced understanding of the interaction between the 'social relational model’ and Goffman’s theory of impression management. Section **7.3** relates how the findings extend the literature on stereotyping by examining the complex, and sometimes contradictory attitudes, experienced by autistic people in the job market. Section **7.4** contributes to the literature on person-job fit and person-organisation fit theories by exploring how stereotyping may permeate an employer’s assessment of the compatibility of autistic applicants with a particular job or organisation. Section **7.5** contributes to HR practice by providing evidence to support an alternative to the conventional interview for assessing job fitness in this group. **7.6** contributes to the knowledge on autism and employment by analysing the relationship between neurotypicality and the service sector. Finally, **7.7** relates how the conceptual framework, which identifies generative mechanisms such as austerity measures, the use of technology in HR practices and the sectoral distribution of the labour market, contributes to knowledge of the wider field of disability and employment.

## 7.2 Contribution to theoretical debates drawing on Goffman’s ‘Impression management’

The concept of ‘impression management’ was established primarily in Goffman’s exposition in ‘The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life’ in which he argued that individuals manipulate their appearance and manner to ‘fit in’ with society in order to achieve their aims. Individuals manage – or seek to manage - the image they convey, based on the collective rules of social behaviour (Goffman, 1959, p. 32). The image is created by manipulating one’s appearance and adopting a certain demeanour or facial expressions to give an ‘idealised’ image of oneself. Using the dramaturgical model, Goffman differentiated between *“frontstage”* where one engages with an *“audience”,* and *“backstage”* where one prepares and rehearses a *“performance”* and relaxes afterwards (Goffman, 1959, p. 129). When front of stage, Goffman argued, it is important both to control one’s presentation and to interpret the cues from one’s audience. It is a basic tenet of Goffman’s theory that we behave differently depending on the ‘audience’ with whom we are interacting. Engagement in this role play - for example, when being interviewed by a potential employer - is viewed as essential in order to conform to social expectations, and thereby succeed (Goffman, 1959). More recent literature on this subject has also argued that attempts to create a favourable impression, particularly among younger applicants, may also extend to the point of deception or ‘faking’ by misrepresenting skills (Melchers, Roulin and Buehl, 2020).

Much less research has been done on ‘impression management’ specifically in relation to autistic people and the workplace. Begeer *et al*. (2008) found that ‘high-functioning’ autistic children were able to alter their self-presentation when seeking some personal advantage, but did so *“less strategically and convincingly than typically-developing children”* (Begeer *et al.*, 2008, p. 1187). A more recent study that involved adults reported that ‘impression management’ or ‘passing as normal’ was generally regarded by participants as a social asset when dealing with institutions such as the educational system, work and healthcare (Schneid and Raz, 2020). However, the examination of ‘impression management’ in relation to autistic job applicants and specifically in relation to Goffman’s theory, appears not to have been addressed. The present study found that in general autistic people were cognisant of the ‘performance’ required by applicants in order to achieve a successful outcome at interview but due to the nature of autism were significantly restricted in their ability to adopt the required modes of behaviour. Using Goffman’s dramaturgical model as a point of reference, the following subsections explain the unique perspective of autistic participants in relation to impression management when preparing for, and undergoing, a job interview.

### 7.2.1 Impression management: disclosure and ‘reasonable adjustments’

The following section contributes to the research on disclosure and ‘reasonable adjustments’ among autistic applicants and demonstrates the link with ‘impression management’ when engaging with potential employers. The evidence revealed that in most cases autistic people recognised the need to create a ‘good impression’ from the outset with potential employers. This in turn influenced their decision in most cases not to reveal their diagnosis to employers at the earliest stages of the application process in case it might adversely affect their chances of being hired. Most autistic participants and some labour market intermediaries expressed the view that a declaration of autism on the application form would reduce the chances of an interview offer.

The literature on disclosure by job applicants with invisible disabilities – a category into which autistic people may fall – is limited, although it has been recognised that disclosure may result in negative employment consequences (von Schrader, Malzer and Bruyère, 2014). In the specific case of autistic job applicants, the supposition that disclosure at the application stage could be disadvantageous was examined by Ameri *et al*. (2018) but the methodology centred on field experiments using fictional data. By contrast, this study gathered empirical data from both autistic job applicants and labour market intermediaries, and these findings support the proposition that a declaration of autism on the application form could negatively impact on whether an interview was offered.

Consistent with their decision not to disclose their autism on the application form, some autistic applicants chose not to request ‘reasonable adjustments’ - which are intended to create a more level playing field for those who are disabled - in order not to give the ‘wrong’ impression. At present, existing literature appears not to have addressed the impact of requesting ‘reasonable adjustments’ at job interviews on outcomes for autistic applicants. However, as indicated above, previous research has shown that a declaration of autism reduces the likelihood of an offer of interview (Ameri *et al.*, 2018). It could be inferred, therefore, that such requests might also be detrimental to the candidate’s chances of being hired. This current study also contributes to knowledge on attitudes to ‘reasonable adjustments’ among autistic job applicants. As stated above, some participants revealed that they would not request them for fear of rejection but others asked for certain accommodations (although they were not always granted) such as questions in advance or more time to respond to questions. Whilst recognising that the latter might create a ‘negative impression’, they rationalised that if the employer was unresponsive to their requests, it was unlikely to be a suitable place of employment. Ohl *et al.* (2017) found that ‘high-functioning’ autistic adults were three times more likely to be employed if they disclosed their condition. However, it was not reported at what *stage* of the process individuals communicated this information (Ohl *et al.*, 2017). The findings in this study were that some employers argued that it would be advantageous for autistic applicants to declare their diagnosis at the outset and to request ‘reasonable adjustments’ in order that they might be assisted through the interview process. This was somewhat contradicted, however, by the admission that they were not prepared in some cases to make adjustments such as providing interview questions in advance and (to a lesser extent) limiting the number of interviewers, which participants said would be of most benefit to them. The analysis of the recruitment experiences of autistic applicants also contributes toward an advanced understanding of the interaction between the 'social relational model’ and Goffman’s theory of impression management

### 7.2.2 Autistic applicants need to present a ‘different’ rather than an ‘ideal’ self to impress interviewers

The following section reveals how findings on the challenges for autistic job applicants when attending interviews provide a new perspective on Goffman’s theory of presenting the ‘ideal’ image. The impression conveyed by candidates at job interviews is one of the major determinants of a successful job application (Rosenfeld, 1997). Moreover, the literature refers to particular aspects of behaviour, both verbal and non-verbal, that are more likely to succeed (DeGroot and Kluemper, 2007). In common with existing research, this study found that, in general, autistic job applicants were aware of the ‘performance’ expected at job interviews (Hull *et al.*, 2017) – and, indeed, some participants referred to the process as a ‘performance’ or ‘pantomime’ - but due to the nature of autism, and specifically their difficulties with social interaction and communication, they were significantly restricted in their ability to adopt the required modes of behaviour (Solomon, 2020). The qualitative data in this study went further, however, in that a number of autistic participants, together with other stakeholders, such as experts in autism and labour market intermediaries, stated that such conduct was an unfair expectation of a group of people who by their condition are innately disadvantaged in certain behaviours. Some stated that it was tantamount to a form of discrimination, akin to requiring gay people at work to behave as if they were straight. The requirement for ‘good’ eye contact, in particular, was viewed by a number of participants as an imposition of normative behaviour on individuals who would find it difficult or impossible to comply with. They questioned the neurotypical assumption that ‘good’ eye contact was an indication of engagement or responsiveness, particularly given that maintaining eye contact was for many a serious distraction that impacted on their concentration and ability to answer questions to the best of their ability.

Another important aspect of Goffman’s exposition of ‘impression management’ is the need to adapt, as well as to adopt, certain behaviours (Goffman, 1959). In Goffman’s work, this entailed an awareness and flexibility in how we respond to others so, for example, interviewees will begin with a notion of the image they wish to project but must be prepared to adjust in response to cues from their interviewer(s). In this respect, autistic candidates were at a significant disadvantage, given that a common trait of autism is an innate difficulty in observing and understanding other people’s reactions in order to moderate behaviour (Wing, 1991). In addition, participants reported that sensory or environmental factors in the interview setting distracted them from ‘performing’ to the best of their ability.

As noted above, a central tenet of Goffman’s theory is that individuals present an ‘idealised’ image of themselves in situations where they are seeking to impress an audience in order to achieve their desired goal (Goffman, 1959, p. 44). The findings of this study confirmed that in general autistic participants were conscious of the need to perform at job interviews, mentally noting a list of perceived behaviours they were required to enact, such as a firm handshake, ‘good’ eye contact and ‘positive’ facial expressions. It was notable, however, that although autistic participants were mindful of the social norms, rather than present their ‘idealised self’, they felt obliged to adopt a ‘different’ identity, physically and mentally - that of the ‘neurotypical’ applicant. In this regard, the majority of participants confirmed existing research that they had to ‘mask’ or ‘camouflage’ (Hull *et al.*, 2017; Schneid and Raz, 2020) but appeared to go further in positing the need to project a persona that would be viewed as ‘neurotypical’, both in terms of physical presentation and interview responses. Similar to the findings of previous studies, the research found low levels of self-esteem in autistic people (McCauley *et al.*, 2019). Autistic participants struggled to ‘sell themselves’ in an interview, even when they were well-qualified and had the appropriate skills for the job. Whilst recognising that employers expected a self-confident ‘performance’, they remarked on their sense of inadequacy in projecting a confident and positive persona. and questioned the belief that they could project a ‘best self’ to succeed at interview. This was particularly apparent in the data relating to self-promotion at interviews.

To some extent, existent research has already indicated the problems presented by trying to present a ‘best self’. Earlier research on autistic children found that in general, ‘high-functioning’ autistic children *“used fewer positive self-statements and were less goal-directed during self-promotion”* than non-autistic children (Begeer *et al.*, 2008, p. 1187). However, the children were able to alter their self-presentation to a certain degree when seeking personal gain. Bergeer *et al.*’s findings seem consistent with Goffman’s assertion that people project an ‘idealised’ self to achieve certain goals that are in their interest, albeit in the case of these autistic children, less proficiently than their neurotypical counterparts. The data from this study, however, suggest a more complex picture for autistic adults. For some, the notion of adopting a ‘front of stage’ persona to impress an employer was not only beyond their capacity – with some participants declaring they had ‘one’ self for whatever audience they were interacting with – but was also bound up with their sense of integrity and self-worth, where it was cognitively impossible to exaggerate and use superlatives about themselves that belied their own self-image. The projection of an idealised image was viewed by some as a form of deception – a ‘fake’ rather than an ‘ideal’ performance. These findings resonate with the contention that *“the autistic brain is… the ultimate truth detector*” (Baron-Cohen, 2008b, p. 69) and therefore to engage in such a performance would be akin to a suspension of truth. It also brings a new perspective to Goffman’s (1959) assertion that as a society we ‘buy into’ the practice of adapting our behaviour to meet the expectations of different audiences, since some autistic participants would argue that it reflected the neurotypicalbut not necessarily the autisticperspective. Finally, the evidence also indicated that where, exceptionally, autistic people maintained a positive self-image, they had learned from experience that the ‘face’ of autism needed to be ‘hidden’ in order to conform to the neurotypical profile expected in the interviewee-employer encounter. This in turn was a source of frustration and some resentment for a number of autistic job seekers.

## 7.3 Contribution to literature on stereotyping

The findings of this study contribute to the literature on stereotyping, specifically regarding autistic people attempting to enter the workplace, by revealing the complexity of employer attitudes to this particular group. Firstly, they show the different - and sometimes conflicting - perceptions of autistic people, as experienced by autistic job applicants. Secondly, they reveal the consequential impact of employers’ stereotyping on their hiring of autistic applicants in relation to person-job fit and person-organisation fit (section **6.4**).

### 7.3.1 Stereotyping of the autistic job applicant

Stereotyping is the generalisation of a group of people to whom we attribute a defined set of characteristics, either positive or negative (Lippmann, 1922). Typically, people form an impression of others based on little or no personal experience of them, influenced possibly by the media or by limited association with other members of that group (Lippmann, 1922). Previous research has shown that when the public has no direct experience of a disability, representations in novels, plays or films may offer compelling and memorable characterisations that exemplify that condition and demonstrate how such individuals “behave, feel, communicate, exhibit symptoms, and experience life” (Baker, 2007, p. 1). A notable representation was ‘Rain Man’, the 1980s American film that portrayed an autistic savant who had an exceptional memory and numerical ability but in all other respects was dependent on others for his daily needs. According to Draaisma (2009), such representations of autistic people have *“contributed to a harmful divergence between the general image of autism and the clinical reality of the autistic condition”* (Draaisma, 2009, p. 1475).

In keeping with previous research, the empirical evidence from this study confirmed that autistic participants had been subject to comparisons with media representations of autism, most frequently ‘Rain Man’. Many autistic participants spoke of the influence of the media in forming attitudes to autism among the general public, and it is possible that a questionnaire might have gleaned more data on the most common cultural references in the media regarding autistic stereotypes. Some believed that the increased publicity surrounding the condition was a positive development and led to a greater awareness of autism. The majority, however, thought the media projected a distorted and stereotypical view that was misleading and potentially damaging. Possibly as a consequence of this exposure, some common assumptions encountered by participants were that autistic people were invariably male, had a learning disability or, conversely, were ‘gifted’ in some respect, usually in mathematics or scientific subjects. The latter illustrates the rather unusual nature of stereotyping in relation to autistic individuals in that participants were sometimes exposed to extreme, yet opposing views, of their ability to perform a job. Some employers regarded autistic participants as intellectually deficient, and therefore requiring close supervision, despite them being highly qualified in their chosen field. Others took the view that they would be ‘infallible’, particularly in relation to STEM subjects.

In common with other studies on stereotyping, some employers who had previously had some association with an autistic person assumed that the autistic applicant would have similar characteristics (Draaisma, 2009; Dovidio *et al.*, 2010). An important finding from this study, however, was that in some cases there was a more ‘extreme’ form of stereotyping. Not only were autistic people viewed as having certain stereotypical traits such as mathematical ability, attention to detail or excellent IT skills, but there appeared also to be a direct and comprehensive ‘transference’ of the traits and characteristics of one known autistic individual to that of an unknown person with broadly the same diagnosis. A manager would therefore expect the same behaviour, skills and presentation from a new autistic employee that he had encountered previously in the workplace or in his social ambit. This would seem to indicate a perception by some that autism was a totally homogeneous condition with none of the individual characteristics that would be assumed in the neurotypical population.

Previous research has found that women ‘mask’ or ‘camouflage’, adopting a ‘neurotypical’ presentation that may conceal their true mental state and subsequently give rise to eating disorders, depression and anxiety (Mandy and Tchanturia, 2015; Beck *et al.*, 2020; Hirvikoski *et al.*, 2020). It has also shown that generally, those who engaged in camouflaging or masking over a sustained period were prone to poorer mental health with higher levels of stress (Cage and Troxell-Whitman, 2019); and suicidal behaviour (Kõlves *et al.*, 2021). This study similarly found that the continual effort that females invested in presenting a ‘neurotypical’ appearance was detrimental to their health.

A particular aspect of stereotyping that does not appear to have been addressed in previous research was the antipathy of some employers and colleagues in cases where individuals - mainly women - did not conform to their own stereotype of autism. Their understanding of the condition appeared to rely on portrayals in the media, previous interactions with an autistic person or their acquired understanding of the condition. Those who did not conform to these expectations were regarded in some cases as imposters, notwithstanding their clinical diagnosis of autism. Some participants stated that the often-invisible nature of autism could lead to employers minimising the condition, compared with that of the physically disabled, with suggestions that they might be ‘looking for special treatment’ or ‘playing the system’. This negative approach was a source of particular distress for those who had sought a diagnosis for what they regarded as a form of ‘protection’ and greater understanding in the workplace, only to be accused of ‘faking it’.

## 7.4 Contribution to knowledge on person-job/person-organisation fit and autistic applicants

This study contributes to the literature on person-job fit and person-organisation fit through findings from autistic applicants and employers. In the case of autistic applicants, it shows how the inherent barriers in the recruitment system, in particular standardised testing, impeded applicants in their pursuit of P-J and P-O fit. In respect of employers, it reveals how stereotyping of autistic applicants might influence employers’ decisions on whether an individual was compatible with their organisation or suited to a particular post.

### 7.4.1 The challenge of standardised assessments for autistic applicants

Section **7.1** explained how existent research has shown that challenges for autistic job applicants surrounding the traditional job interview have contributed to very low levels of recruitment among this group. The findings of this research go further, however, in revealing the impact of the increasing use of standardised tests, usually online, on outcomes for autistic applicants. These tests, while not requiring the same degree of social communication and interaction of the conventional interview, nevertheless are constructed according to certain assumptions that align more with the neurotypical than with the autistic person. A key feature of the tests is that they are applied at the initial stages of the application process before any engagement with human resources, and failure leads to automatic elimination.

One of the forms of standardised assessment is Situational Judgement Tests (SJTs). As noted in **6.3.6** above, SJTs are a form of psychometric testing that are routinely used by organisations to screen applicants for ‘job fitness’ in the first stages of recruitment. They have increasingly been used by employers, particularly for graduates but also for entry level posts in retail and customer service (Patterson *et al.*, 2012). Often in the form of a standardised test online, or sometimes outsourced to agencies to conduct by telephone, these assessments require candidates to consider a series of hypothetical workplace scenarios that they might encounter in the role for which they have applied, and to judge how they would respond to a particular dilemma. Typically, applicants must select one course of action from the multiple-choice question or, in some cases, rank the three or four options available. SJTs are used across a wide range of industries as a mandatory part of the assessment process, with success in them a prerequisite for interview.

In this study’s findings, SJTs were problematic for autistic applicants. As noted in **2.3.1** above, one of the defining characteristics of autism is the challenge of ‘Theory of Mind’ (Wing, 1991) whereby autistic people may lack the capacity to conjure up scenarios of which they have no experience, rather than drawing on past situations*.* Previous literature has alluded to the difficulty for autistic candidates in responding to hypothetical questions, and indeed more recent studies have posited the view that for interviews with autistic applicants, closed questions based on an individual’s past experiences may be preferable to open, hypothetical questions (Townsley *et al.*, 2014). However, there appears to be a gap in the literature regarding the impact on outcomes for autistic people when SJTs are utilised to ‘filter’ applicants in the initial stage of a job application. The findings from this study help to fill this gap.

A similar obstacle for autistic applicants that existing academic literature appears not to have addressed is the use of Artificial Intelligence software to screen job applicants for person-organisation fit. Used by FTSE 100 companies and many organisations with a very high volume of applications, the algorithm scans the uploaded video performance of candidates at the preliminary stages of recruitment to determine whether they should proceed to the next round (Bogen and Rieke, 2018; Buranyi, 2018). Based on an ideal construct comprising the qualities most valued by that organisation and demonstrated by their ‘star’ employees (Turner, 2018), they analyse speech, ‘micro-expressions’ such as blinking or smiling, as well as posture and body language (Turner, 2018). The findings from this study suggest that such measures may be discriminatory as the autistic applicant is being measured against a neurotypical model based on an ‘ideal’ company employee. One participant likened the process to a photocopier where employers were seeking to replicate exact ‘copies’ of employees who fitted the company mould*.* Critically, labour market intermediaries argued that this mechanistic approach disadvantaged autistic applicants who fell outside the neurotypical parameters set by the algorithm.

An important feature of these standardised tests in relation to autistic applicants was the lack of opportunity to make ‘reasonable adjustments’. Employers acknowledged that some autistic candidates were unaware of the ‘hypothetical’ nature of the questions and, although it was possible to request an alternative form of testing, it was not clear from their recruitment website. Consequently, many autistic candidates had completed the online tests and failed, without an opportunity to demonstrate their job fitness. Similarly, employers explained that the components of the software used to analyse video screenings in algorithm-based interviews of candidates were bespoke and could not be modified for the purposes of ‘reasonable adjustments’; yet they did not know whether it would discriminate against autistic candidates. Some autistic participants had been rejected by standardised testing but were subsequently successful, having requested an alternative form of assessment. Many participants were unclear, however, what options were available to them under ‘reasonable adjustments,’ and some employers admitted that an alternative assessment - if available - was not widely promulgated.

## 7.5 Contribution to practice: alternatives to the conventional interview for assessing job fitness in autistic applicants

Sections 7**.1 to 7.4** above explained the challenges faced by autistic people undergoing processes for recruitment selection. Some autistic participants, employers and stakeholders argued for a fairer, more effective and sustainable form of assessment for autistic job applicants. As indicated above, previous research has largely focused on how to modify autistic behaviour to present a ‘neurotypical’ image at job interviews More recently, assistive technology has been used to train autistic job seekers: Strickland, Coles and Southern (2013), for example, found that participants gained a greater facility for responding to set interview questions, but there was noticeably less ‘improvement’ in their posture, eye contact and facial expression, and there was no evaluation of a more generalised learning with other interviewers (Strickland, Coles and Southern, 2013, p. 9). Given their awareness of how they might demonstrate better their suitability to a particular job, participants in this study outlined alternative methods of assessment.

### 7.5.1 Job-based tasks and work trials as a means of assessing autistic applicants

The overwhelming preference of autistic participants in this research was for a form of assessment that tested the skills they would need in the job, rather than the social skills expected in a conventional interview. Stakeholders such as labour market intermediaries and experts in autism also supported this view, arguing that the conventional interview format placed immense pressure on autistic people on the autism spectrum and tested them in skills in which they were least likely to perform well. An alternative that would allow them to carry out relevant job tasks was seen as a fairer and more effective means of assessment. Most favoured was a form of work trial; in this way the autistic individual had the opportunity both to demonstrate the actual competencies needed to perform the job and their compatibility with the environment.

Job-based tasks that mirror the work required to perform the day-to-day job are used as a form of assessment in a variety of industries. They are found most commonly in hospitality and retail at entry level but are also used in jobs of a technical or practical nature such as data manipulation and coding, and equipment operation (www.youthemployment.org.uk, 2023). This study revealed that most of the participants who had experienced these forms of assessment, which ranged from a computer-based task of less than an hour to a few hours on the shop floor, and typically were no longer than a half day, preferred them to the traditional interview. They were both more confident in demonstrating the specific skills relevant to the job – compared with the social and communication skills tested in the conventional interview – and regarded them as a fairer assessment of their attributes for the post. In particular, they welcomed the degree of focus that they could bring to the task without the need to concentrate on social mannerisms such as good eye contact, posture and positive facial expressions. Also, where they had done well in the practical assessment, they felt that there was less pressure on them if there was a subsequent interview. One proviso was that they would need information in advance on the nature, objectives and length of the task.

Whilst job-related tasks were viewed positively by participants, work trials that offered a more extended form of appraisal by employer and employee were most favoured by autistic participants. The small minority who demurred were concerned with practical considerations such as remuneration during the trial period, and a few participants expressed concern at being monitored too closely. However, the vast majority approved of this form of assessment, and viewed it as an opportunity that was denied to them at present but where they would have the chance to acclimatise both to the job and to the work environment. Moreover, they viewed it as a fairer and more effective method for both employer and applicant to assess their long-term suitability to a post, as employers could assess how they managed their day-to-day responsibilities. Several participants who were now in employment said that a form of work trial, whether through voluntary work, a form of internship or the intervention of an intermediary, had been the means by which they had been able to enter the job market, whereas previously they had failed in interviews alone. An important factor in their successful outcome was the opportunity to get to know the working environment, as well as to demonstrate their skills. Others who had not had this experience believed that this more measured approach, with a greater focus on delivery than on social interaction, would enable them to feel more at ease and perform to the best of their ability.

An important aspect of the work trial is the opportunity to inform employer and autistic applicant of the likely sustainability of the employment. In this study, several participants expressed the view that they would have a clearer idea not only of what the job entailed but also of the practical aspects of the working conditions and interactions with colleagues that could prove critical in their decision to remain in the job. The sensory environment, lunch break arrangements and layout of the office were all factors that might influence an autistic employee’s decision to remain in their job. Some autistic participants also commented that they felt obliged to ‘mask’ for the duration of the interview to have a successful outcome but a work trial would allow them time to adjust to the workplace and perhaps relieve some of the pressure to continually ‘camouflage’.

## 7.6 The relationship between neurotypicality and service sector work

In recent years, neurodivergence has begun to be viewed as an advantage in some sectors, such as information technology, coding and electronics. Indeed, organisations such as GCHQ (Government Communications Headquarters) now actively recruit autistic and other neurodivergent employees, such as those with dyslexia and ADHD, in recognition of the fact that they may have particular skills well suited to their operations (GCHQ, no date) . However, the majority of jobs in the UK economy fall within the traditional service industries such as retail, hospitality, health and education. The literature shows that where there is face-to-face engagement with the public, employers place great importance on ‘soft’ skills which are generally associated with neurotypical behaviour. The importance of such skills in the recruitment of front-line retail work has been confirmed in a number of studies, where employers have expressed a preference for ‘soft’ skills, rather than qualifications, when recruiting entry level employees (Nickson *et al.,* 2012; Bunt *et al.,* 2005). Given that many autistic people have problems with communication and interpersonal skills, employers may be less likely to view them as suitable for ‘front-line’ work and, indeed retailers who participated in the research said that their autistic employees were generally more suited to ‘backroom’ duties and the warehouse, rather than on the shopfloor or at the checkout (**see 6.2.5**). The research indicated, however, that - reflecting the heterogeneity of the condition - some autistic participants wished to work in front line roles, for example in the NHS or in retail, but found that in some cases employers judged them unsuitable for such posts. In customer service, for example, it was evident that some employers were seeking staff who demonstrated not only competence and courtesy in the role but had an ‘outgoing’ personality, a category into which most autistic people are unlikely to fall (**see 6.5.3**). The ramifications of this approach may extend not only to those seeking entry level jobs but also to those in further or higher education, who are seeking to develop a CV for future permanent employment. For example, A14, a linguistics student who had difficulty with eye contact, had experienced difficulty finding part-time work in the retail and hospitality sectors where most student employment exists. Consequently, he was concerned that, unlike many of his contemporaries, he was unable to demonstrate a record of ‘work experience’ in applications for graduate jobs.

It is clear from the literature that autistic applicants are not the only neurodivergent group who may fall outside the parameters of “those who look and sound the part” (Felstead, 2006, p 27). The Institute of Leadership and Management found in a survey of 1156 respondents that 50% of employers were unwilling to employ someone from one of the neurominorities specified. These comprised ADHD/ADD, autism, dyscalculia, dyslexia and Tourette’s. Bias was most pronounced against those with ADHD or Tourette’s syndrome, with one in three employers stating they would feel uncomfortable hiring or managing a person with either of these conditions. The same was reported by one in four managers for autism or dyscalculia, one in five for dyspraxia and one in ten for dyslexia. The report concluded that many neurodivergent people “*experience exclusion, discrimination and damaging stereotyping within the workplace*” (Institute of Leadership and Management, 2020, p 4). Although the report did not provide data specifically on the service sector, it found under-representation of neurominorities in all sectors but at its greatest in the private sector. According to the report’s findings, many participants seemed unaware that an assumption that an individual is unable or unsuitable to do a particular job or activity based purely on having a neurodivergent condition would be a direct form of discrimination, and in many cases a false assumption (Institute of Leadership and Management, 2020, p. 4).

## 7.7 Contribution to knowledge of the wider field of disability and employment

This thesis sought to examine the reasons for the very low employment rates among autistic people in the UK. In developing the theoretical framework, however, it emerged that the generative mechanisms that impacted on autistic candidates might also affect other disabled groups. In the following subsections, the influences of technology, HR recruitment practices and austerity measures on outcomes for other neurodivergent applicants are discussed.

***7.7.1 The limitations of technology***

Technology has significantly impacted on the job application and selection process. The move to online applications, in particular, has enabled employers to reach a wider pool of applicants and, in most cases, online job postings and digital platforms have expanded the range of opportunities for candidates. The limitations of systems that rely too heavily on mechanised systems, however, have also become increasingly evident. The objective of recruitment software is to streamline the examination of applications and condense the decision-making process but in so doing, there is a significant risk that the data may exclude, or discriminate against, certain sections of the workforce as the programmes are unlikely to accommodate the varied nature of disability, gender or race. In particular, AI recruitment packages that rely on historical data from CVs to train or amend the software are likely to perpetuate the status quo within organisations so that where, for example, females, disabled people or minorities have been underrepresented in the past, the same profile is likely to be replicated in the future. In some cases, disabled people may be excluded even from accessing the job application process because of the techniques used to establish legitimacy of entry. For example, CAPTCHAs that aim to distinguish human beings from bots set time limits that may disadvantage some physically disabled people with agility problems, as well as some dyslexic applicants who may take longer to read the instructions (Guo *et al.*, 2019).

The potential for bias extends also to AI video hiring programmes as the algorithms are often trained on data drawn from the current demographics of society. Autistic people may perform atypically in respect of eye contact or hand gestures, for example; and facial recognition tools may work less well on people with darker skin tones because people of colour are underrepresented in datasets. Similarly, those with certain conditions such as Down’s Syndrome, Bell’s Palsy or Parkinson’s disease are likely to fall outside the parameters set by the algorithms used to assess facial expressions; and candidates with a stammer, strong accent or unusual modulation are also at risk of falling these AI hiring tests (Guo *et al.,* 2019). It can be seen that in this context, underrepresentation by gender, race or disability may lead to continued exclusion in the workplace when algorithms are the sole or primary means of selection.

***7.7.2 The lack of transparency in AI software impacts on a disabled applicant’s right to ‘reasonable adjustments’ and may lead to discrimination***

The lack of transparency currently in the content and application of the algorithms in recruitment software means that where there is discrimination - albeit inadvertent - it may not become apparent until after the software has been deployed, if at all. While those promoting AI hiring tools argue that they were designed to eliminate bias, in practice they are at risk of achieving the opposite, if they are applied without a thorough understanding of their composition and operation. An important consideration in this respect is whether employers have an incentive to proactively address the possible biases in their recruitment software and ensure that their systems are fair, transparent and accountable. Where incidents of discrimination are brought to their notice (as with Amazon, **see 2.9**), they have a legal obligation to remedy the bias. Elsewhere, however, where the composition of the algorithm is unknown, and sufficient job applications are received to meet a business’s operational requirements, employers may feel less inclined to be proactive, with the result that systemic discrimination may continue. Currently, the legal right of all disabled groups to ‘reasonable adjustments’ appears to be compromised by the lack of disclosure from recruiting organisations using AI. Moreover, there appears to be insufficient legal oversight of such systems with the government’s latest proposals on this subject (Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, 2023), envisaging regulatory guidance, rather than statutory sanctions, for those who fail to comply.

***7.7.3 The impact of austerity on EDI in the public sector***

The research findings indicated that budgetary constraints – or austerity measures – might impact on the capacity of public sector employers to offer work trials or a form of extended assessment for autistic job applicants. One employer in the public sector, whilst acknowledging that such methods were a more reliable means of assessing the sustainability of potential employees, argued that in practice, financial constraints denied them the opportunity to be more flexible in their approach to recruitment. With tight budgets and limited resources, it was incumbent on them to fill vacant posts quickly to ensure continued operational efficiency. Significantly, of those participants who said that they had been offered work trials in the past, all had been in the private sector.

The disability employment rate overall for the period April to June 2023 was 52.6%, significantly lower than that of the non-disabled workforce at 82.5% ; and the disability employment gap of 29.9% was at its widest since 2018 (pre-pandemic). (Adam, Brown and Dong, 2023) There is insufficient granularity in official data to examine the underlying changes in employment patterns for disabled people, although the statistics confirm that disabled people are much more likely to be in part-time work and less likely to be appointed to higher managerial roles (Office for National Statistics, 2019). Importantly, in considering opportunities for disabled people, the data clearly show that those disabled groups who are in employment are more likely to have a physical condition rather than mental health issues or a neurodivergent condition, such as autism (Office for National Statistics, 2019). The literature shows that employers are more wary of employing such individuals because they suspect they will need greater management, have higher sickness absence or be less likely to ‘fit in’ (Farley *et al.*, 2018; Mai, 2019). These groups are therefore likely to benefit from opportunities such as a work trial to demonstrate their suitability to a post. Reduced departmental budgets in the public sector since the start of austerity measures in 2010 have, however, impacted on employers’ scope for flexibility in their operations, including recruitment. The Institute of Government has reported that “Public services are in a much more fragile position now than in 2010. This is a result of both the first round of austerity and more recently the pandemic" (Hoddinott, Fright and Pope, no date, p. 2). As most disabled people are employed in the public sector (Adam, Brown and Dong, 2023), the continuing financial constraints experienced by employers in the sector are likely to impact on job opportunities for disabled groups.

## 7.8 Summary

This chapter has outlined the contribution of the research findings to the literature on the impact of impression management, stereotyping and person-job/person-organisation on the selection of autistic job applicants. The inclusion of autistic job seekers, employers and expert stakeholders in the research has enabled a nuanced examination of the perspectives of all major players involved. Further, by drawing on the empirical data from these interviews, the study has set out the case for an alternative approach to assessing autistic job applicants, namely work trials, that offers a fairer and more effective means of evaluating sustainable employment for this particular group. Moreover, the theoretical framework, which has identified generative mechanisms such as austerity measures, the use of technology in HR practices and the sectoral distribution of the labour market, may be applicable to other disabled groups, and therefore relevant to the wider field of disability and employment.

The existing literature on impression management theory has outlined how society holds certain expectations of how we conduct ourselves, depending on the person with whom we are interacting. There is an understanding and an acceptance, it is argued, that we ‘modify’ our behaviour and appearance in anticipation of the individual we are engaged with, and that our ‘performance’ is further adjusted as the dialogue progresses, according to the cues and responses received. In the specific case of the job interview, Goffman’s notion of presenting an ‘idealised’ image of oneself would apply in order to achieve a successful outcome. This study shows that in general most autistic participants had a good understanding of the ‘performance’ required to conform to society’s expectations and were mindful of a set of behaviours that they had learned to enact in this scenario. However, due to the clinical profile of autism, they were significantly restricted in their ability to adopt the required modes of behaviour. Moreover, and perhaps of greater significance, there was a sense that rather than presenting their ‘best front’ and ‘modifying’ their behaviour, they were required to adopt an ‘alternative’ identity – that of the ‘neurotypical’ applicant. Efforts to mask their autism in order to appear more ‘acceptable’ to the interviewer were often debilitating and led to frustration and some resentment. Further, the element of self-promotion expected at interviews was not only beyond the innate capability of some but also bound up with their sense of integrity and low self-esteem.

The academic literature on the stereotyping of autistic job applicants is limited. This study revealed that autistic job applicants were exposed to a variety of stereotyping, sometimes influenced by portrayals in the media, with common assumptions that all autistic people were male, lacked a sense of humour or were ‘gifted’. Further, in extreme cases there appeared to be a comprehensive ‘transference’ of traits and characteristics, where neurotypical individuals who had some experience of an autistic individual would assume that all autistic people would demonstrate exactly the same attributes, strengths and weaknesses irrespective of age, gender or background. This would indicate a perception of autism as a totally homogeneous condition, devoid of individual personality, with none of the unique characteristics expected in the neurotypical population. In addition, it was revealed that as a consequence of stereotyping, where individuals did not conform to the ‘expected’ profile – particularly females – they were sometimes met with suspicion and regarded as impostors who were ‘playing the system’, even though they were clinically diagnosed with the condition. While most had guidelines in place to combat stereotyping at the selection stage, several employers admitted that it was not possible to guarantee that stereotyping would not enter into the interviewing panel’s decisions. Furthermore, the study found that in large organisations where outsourcing to recruitment agencies was commonplace, employers did not monitor whether policies on diversity and inclusion were in situ to counteract stereotyping.

An important finding was that in some cases employers were unaware of the composition of their selection software and how it might discriminate against autistic applicants. Critical to the execution of these tests was that ‘reasonable adjustments’, which are designed to create a more level playing field for the disabled applicant, were not available, as the tests were required to be administered unmodified and intact. The empirical findings from autistic participants included cases where those who had requested an alternative form of assessment to SJTs or video recorded interviews were ultimately successful in their application, thus confirming these tests were not a suitable measure of person-job fit or person-organisation fit for autistic applicants. Employers acknowledged that clearer communication was needed to inform autistic applicants of their right to request alternative forms of assessment with the result that currently they were probably missing out on suitable autistic job applicants.

The findings contribute to the literature on person-job fit by garnering employers’ views in respect of autistic candidates. Regarding the type of employment to be undertaken, employers stated in most cases that they would not exclude such applicants from any particular role but remarked on observed strengths in autistic employees such as attention to detail, a high level of focus and facility with complex data that made them a ‘good fit’ for jobs such as banking, insurance and financial services. Such a perspective might be advantageous to autistic people seeking employment in those particular sectors but was of concern to those applying for jobs in the creative, teaching and caring professions who felt that their competencies in these areas were less well recognised and indeed questioned by employers, reinforcing the stereotyping to which they had been exposed elsewhere.

This study also contributes to the literature on person-organisation fit in exploring attitudes to hiring applicants, depending on the sector in which the organisation operates – public, private or third sector. Previous research in this area is limited but it was found that private sector employers were the least likely to engage autistic people. It was surprising, therefore, that the empirical data from this study - specifically in relation to work trials - suggested the contrary, due to factors such as budgetary constraints and the need to fill posts quickly in the public sector. While labour market intermediaries argued that both positive and negative attitudes might be found in the same sector, and indeed the same organisation, and that the most critical determinant of a successful placement for autistic job seekers was an open-minded approach from the manager and work colleagues, in practice work trials that had been offered to autistic participants in this research were in the private sector. Finally, this study has shown that the conventional methods used by the majority of employers are at best ineffective and at worst discriminatory in assessing an autistic applicant’s suitability for a particular post. With the growth of artificial intelligence in the standardisation and evaluation of assessments, the current disadvantages experienced by autistic applicants seem likely to increase. Further, the consensus from research participants - autistic candidates, employers and stakeholders - was that work trials provided the fairest and most effective way of assessing autistic individuals for sustained employment, allowing them to demonstrate their job-fitness rather than undergo a ‘social skills’ test, which may discriminate against a group who, by the very nature of their condition, are unlikely to compare favourably with neurotypical competitors. However, while most employers were supportive of work trials in theory, only a few private sector organisations had made provision for them in practice.

# Chapter 8: Conclusions

## 8.1 Introduction

Unemployment among autistic people, including graduates, is very high; and autistic people have the highest level of unemployment among all disability groups, despite their express wish to work. This study set out to explore the influences, and interrelationship, of impression management, stereotyping and person-job/ person-organisation fit on outcomes for autistic job applicants, with particular reference to the selection process. Further, in the light of those findings, the research considered whether an alternative form of assessment would be fairer and more effective for this group of applicants. The research aimed to bring together the attitudes, observations and experiences of employers, applicants and professional stakeholders to gain a wider understanding of the challenges of the conventional interview for autistic applicants and, based on those findings, to develop practical recommendations that might be applied in the selection process.

This concluding chapter first draws together the research outcomes in relation to the overall aim and research questions (**8.2**). The next section highlights key contributions to theory and existent knowledge (**8.3**). In some areas, the findings support evidence to be found in current literature and in others they shed new light on important aspects of the selection of autistic job applicants. The research process is also examined with reference to positionality and reflexivity in **8.4**. The implications for both employment policy and practice in relation to autistic applicants are considered in **8.5**, with discussion of a possible alternative to the traditional job interview. Finally, the limitations of the study, together with possible directions for future research, are discussed in **8.6**.

## 8.2 Achievement of overall aim and objectives

The aim of this study was to explore the influences, and interrelationship, of impression management, stereotyping and person-job/ person-organisation fit on outcomes for autistic job applicants, with particular reference to the selection process. This aim was achieved through addressing the following specific questions:

1. What are the main generative mechanisms that help to explain the low levels of employment among disabled people, and autistic people in particular?

2. Which selection processes might best enable autistic applicants to demonstrate their suitability for a job, and to what extent are employers willing to adapt their selection methods for autistic applicants?

3. To what extent do stereotyping, person-job fit and person-organisation fit influence the recruitment process for autistic job applicants?

4. To what extent and how do autistic applicants engage in impression management and with what outcomes?

5. How can analysis of the recruitment experiences of autistic applicants aid our understanding of the interaction between the ‘social relational model’ and Goffman’s theory of impression management?

6. How might recruitment policy and practice be changed in order to facilitate the recruitment of autistic applicants, and how might such changes be influenced by the legislative, economic and socio-cultural context?

### 8.2.1 Impression management

The research sought to examine the extent to which autistic applicants engage in ‘impression management’, and with what outcomes. This was addressed in **chapters 3 and 5**, where the existent literature was examined, alongside new empirical data drawn from participants in the study. The literature confirmed that the impression one conveys at a job interview is one of the major determinants of a successful application, with a preference for certain modes of behaviour. These relate to both verbal behaviour (fluency of speech, tone of voice and responsiveness to the interviewer) and to non-verbal behaviour (firm handshake, eye contact, good posture and ‘positive’ facial expressions).

The clinical profile of autism, however, indicates that those on the spectrum will have one or more developmental traits that may inhibit their ability to adopt the required modes of behaviour, and may be further impacted by external influences such as the environment and sensory input. Fifty-two autistic adults were asked to relate their experiences of, and views on, conventional job interviews, together with eight employers and nine stakeholders who were experts in autism or had acted as mentors or coaches in supporting autistic people into employment. From the data collected, seven main themes were identified that impact on the ability of autistic candidates to make a favourable impression on potential employers: disclosure of autism; ‘reasonable adjustments’; sensory processing and the environment; non-verbal behaviour; responding to interview questions; self-promotion and anxiety.

Regarding the first of these, the study was able to extend knowledge on disclosure. Ameri *et al*. (2018) had already found that applications that contained a declaration of autism were unlikely to receive an offer of an interview. However, the methodology used centred on field experiments and fictional data. By contrast, this study gathered empirical data from both autistic job applicants and labour market intermediaries. These findings both supported the proposition that such a declaration could negatively impact on whether an interview was offered, and also gathered data on the stage in the application process at which autistic applicants chose to disclose to employers, should they elect to do so. This study revealed that most people did not declare their autism on the job application form for fear of creating a poor impression that would lead to rejection. Some participants went further in observing that they were invited to fewer interviews when they disclosed their condition at the outset. Disclosure was therefore usually made only after an offer of interview – and sometimes after a job offer - with some applicants making their decision based on the perceived culture of the organisation. The study was also able to bring some new perspectives on ‘reasonable adjustments’ for autistic job applicants, where there appeared to be a gap in the existent literature. While some of the literature has addressed the subject of ‘reasonable adjustments’ in the workplace, it appears not to have considered them in the context of the job interview, apart from occasional references to whether autistic candidates should request interview questions in advance (Petty *et al.*, 2023). This study found that some participants were unaware of, or had a poor understanding of, ‘reasonable adjustments’, and in some cases elected not to request them in case they raised a ‘red flag’ that would deter employers from inviting them to interview. Where some participants did apply for them, they reported that certain requests – such as advance notice of interview questions – were refused or overlooked.

In relation to sensory processing and environment, the findings were consistent with previous studies that point to the negative impact of some sensory issues, such as noise and light, on the autistic candidate’s ability to focus at job interviews. In this study, however, the data also suggested that the conduct of the interview was an important factor in enabling candidates to create a ‘good impression’, with a preference for a formal set up where interviewer and interviewee sat on either side of the desk, rather than an informal discussion in a more social setting. The more formal setting also provided some ‘cover’ for candidates who were prone to stimming, such as uncontrolled hand movements. In the case of non-verbal behaviour, there has been extensive research on the challenges experienced by autistic candidates, most notably in relation to ‘good eye contact’, which is regarded as essential behaviour at interview. These findings support the evidence of previous studies as most autistic participants identified ‘good eye contact’ as the most difficult physical challenge for them. However, the research also shed some light on the underlying reasons for their difficulty in sustaining ‘good eye contact’. The data suggest that for some, the experience was not just the physical impact of making contact with another person’s eyes but also the sense that they were exposing themselves to a possible threat or even revealing their innermost thoughts to strangers.

Problems relating to Theory of Mind (see **chapter 2.3**), and a tendency to interpret language literally, impact significantly on autistic candidates’ ability to deal with ‘hypothetical’ questions at interview, as previous studies have shown. While confirming this aspect, the present research went further in highlighting the impact on outcomes when this form of questioning is embedded in assessments used to screen candidates at the preliminary stages of selection, such as Situational Judgement Tests used to ‘filter’ applicants at the first stage of recruitment. This is a key finding and is considered in greater detail in **8.3** in relation to standardised testing. In relation to ‘self-promotion’, it was found that autistic candidates often lacked the confidence to project a positive image and to create the required impression at interviews. In some cases, this was due to low self-esteem, as reported in previous studies (Cooper, Smith and Russell, 2017; McCauley *et al.*, 2019), but in others it was rather that they could not present an ‘alternative persona’ in order to impress at interview, either because of an innate inability or because they believed it was a form of deception that would compromise their integrity. This would appear to contradict Goffman’s assertion that as a society we ‘buy into’ certain social expectations of how, for example, we conduct ourselves at job interviews. Rather it would suggest that for some autistic people there is a genuine conflict in terms of the need to project a certain image at interview and their sense of - and inability to be other than - their innate, ‘true’ self. Extreme anxiety was also shown to have a significant effect on a candidate’s ability to perform well. Anxiety might occur at each stage of the process: in the days before when preparing for the interview, during the process, followed by a sense of exhaustion, once it was over.

The examination of the factors that hinder candidates in their efforts to create a ‘good impression’ at conventional job interviews led to consideration of possible alternatives for assessing the competencies of this group. The type of assessment most favoured by participants was that of a work trial, which allowed both employer and applicant to form a more rounded judgement of job match. An important aspect of the work trial, according to participants and employers in this study, is its capacity to assess the likely sustainability of employment. Several participants remarked that they would have a clearer idea not only of the demands of the job but also of the working environment and social interactions that could prove critical in their decision to remain in employment.

Finally, while previous research has confirmed that the conventional interview is a barrier to autistic people seeking to enter the job market, the evidence from participants in this study indicated that the job interview continued to be a barrier throughout their working life, since promotion or alternative jobs depended on success in the same process which had presented such difficulties at the outset. Consequently, a number of participants felt ‘trapped’ in jobs that they disliked, or where they were underemployed, because they could not countenance the ordeal of another interview.

***8.2.2 Stereotyping, person-job fit and person-organisation fit***

In **chapter 6**, the study revealed the challenges faced by autistic job applicants in respect of stereotyping, person-job fit (P-J fit) and person-organisation fit (P-O fit); and their possible interrelationship in terms of outcomes for autistic job applicants. In respect of stereotyping, autistic participants reported various aspects of this phenomenon which they had encountered from employers at job interviews or while in employment. For some employers, their knowledge of autism appeared to be derived from portrayals in the media with common misunderstandings that autistic people were always male, had learning difficulties, lacked a sense of humour or were ‘gifted’ in some respect, usually in mathematics or scientific subjects. Although previous research has referred to the stereotyping of autistic people, the findings in this study indicated a more extreme attitude, analogous in some cases to the phenomenon of ‘transference’ (Jung, 1954). In such instances, where employers knew a relative or a previous employee with autism, they assumed that all other autistic applicants would exhibit the same traits, strengths and weaknesses. A further concerning consequence of this form of stereotyping, which does not appear to have been addressed in the existent literature, was that those who did not conform to the ‘expected’ profile - particularly females but also some males - could arouse suspicion that their diagnosis was not genuine and might therefore be ‘attention seeking’ or ‘playing the system’. While most employers indicated that they had guidelines in place to overcome possible stereotyping at the selection stage, several admitted that much depended on the interviewer on the day, and that it was not possible to guarantee that stereotyping would not enter into the selection panel’s decisions when interviewing an autistic applicant. An important finding that does not appear to have been addressed in the literature to date is that where organisations outsourced to recruitment agencies, employers did not monitor whether policies on diversity and inclusion were in place to counteract stereotyping and discrimination. Given that some medium to large organisations have extensive outsourcing arrangements, this could have negative consequences for the selection of autistic and other disabled applicants.

In relation to person-job fit, the study revealed two specific areas that autistic job applicants found challenging at the early stages of the application process, impacting on their assessment of ‘job-fitness’: the job description and Situational Judgement Tests (SJTs). As existing research has suggested, many autistic participants cited the job description as one of the barriers to applying for positions (Müller *et al.*, 2003). The often-lengthy form of the document, the use of jargon or ‘buzzwords’, the need to distinguish between the ‘essential’ and ‘desirable’ elements of the post (where these were not clearly stated) and the common stipulation of ‘good communication skills’ were typical challenges faced by participants. Consequently, their decision as to whether they were a good ‘job-fit’ was hampered by the inaccessibility of the document and their difficulty in understanding the competencies necessary for the job. Additionally, in this study, a number of major employers also acknowledged that their job descriptions lacked clarity in some respects and failed to spell out the essentials of the post.

The research added to existent literature by revealing the increasing use and impact of online SJTs to gauge person-job fit. They posed a particular challenge for autistic job seekers who struggled with hypothetical questions, and often lacked the capacity to conjure up scenarios of which they had no experience (in contrast to drawing on *past* experience) when deciding on a course of action. In some cases, it was the lack of detail in the question that prevented applicants from selecting one option, whereas they would have been confident in giving a narrative response in which they could discuss the relative merits of the options. For most autistic participants, they were a major obstacle to navigating the hiring process and, interestingly, some employers also questioned their *effectiveness* - as opposed to their *efficiency* - in selecting candidates. Autistic participants and employers also noted that selection tests often required a minimum score or gave equal weighting to a wide range of criteria, irrespective of the precise skills required for the post. Some employers had recognised the disadvantage of these methods to autistic applicants who could have a ‘spiky’ profile, and while excelling in some areas were more likely to lose out to the good ‘all-rounder’. The interrelationship between Person-Job fit and stereotyping was also evident in employers’ views on specific roles for autistic employees in their organisation. While not excluding the possibility of hiring autistic people in any capacity, they cited certain jobs to which autistic people were well ‘fitted’. In particular, employers with experience of hiring autistic people, spoke of observed strengths such as attention to detail, a high level of focus and a facility with complex data that made them excellent employees in banking, insurance and financial services. Such observations might be of benefit to autistic people seeking employment in those sectors but they were a source of frustration to those applying for jobs in the creative or caring professions who felt that their competencies in these areas were less well recognised, and indeed questioned, by employers, reinforcing the stereotyping to which they had been exposed elsewhere.

Regarding person-organisation fit, most autistic participants reflected on whether they would ‘fit in’ with an organisation before applying for a job but had differing views on whether a particular sector - public, private or third - would be more positive in their attitude to autistic candidates. While for some the public sector was ‘understanding’ and ‘comforting’, for others it ‘lacked accountability’ and problems that arose were sometimes not dealt with in a timely fashion. One of the most surprising findings - and in contrast to existing literature - was that the private sector was seen to operate more flexibly, providing opportunities for employment, whereas the public sector could be hampered by rigid processes and budgetary constraints. Labour market intermediaries, who were experienced in supporting autistic people job seekers into employment, argued that the organisational culture of an entity, rather than the sector in which it operated, was key to whether an autistic individual would ‘fit in’. In this context ‘culture’ was interpreted more as the day-to-day management and ambience of the work environment rather than the declared goals and guiding principles of an organisation. In their view, both positive and negative attitudes might be found in the same sector, and indeed the same organisation, and the most critical determinant of successful placement of autistic job seekers was an open-minded approach from the manager and work colleagues.

A major gap in the current literature is the increasing use of Artificial Intelligence – as with SJTs - to screen out candidates in the early stages of the application process. To address this, the study considered the possible impact of algorithm-based video interviews on the selection of autistic (and other disabled) applicants. One of the participating employers - a major British multinational retailer - used this form of selection for their graduate programme. They were unaware, however, of the composition of the software and consequently its potential for discrimination. Generally, the algorithms that are used in this type of software derive from data drawn from neurotypical candidates and, more specifically, from ‘ideal’ employees that the organisation is seeking to replicate. As the detailed components of the software are bespoke and unavailable to applicants – *‘a black box’* (Kelan, 2023, p. 8) - it is not possible for autistic candidates to request ‘reasonable adjustments’ to create a more level playing field when undergoing this assessment. One autistic participant who failed an AI screening was eventually successful following her complaint that the process breached the Equality Act, and was subsequently hired following a face-to-face interview.

Finally, the defining principle of person-organisation fit is that greater weight is given to an individual’s compatibility with the culture and ethics of an organisation rather than to the ‘perfect fit’ for the job for which they have applied (Sekiguchi, 2004). In this respect both applicants and employers, albeit only in the private sector, cited cases where a candidate was judged as unsuited to the post for which they had applied but were offered an alternative position in the company.

## 8.3 Key contributions to theory and existent knowledge

This study has helped to explain the very low employment rates among autistic people. Using a critical realist approach, it has identified generative mechanisms that contribute to the unemployment of autistic people and may apply also to other disability groups. These mechanisms include the sectoral distribution of the labour market, where the service sector predominates and employers favour people of neurotypical presentation, who demonstrate ‘soft’ skills. Similarly, changes in recruitment methods that increasingly rely on AI techniques may disadvantage many disabled groups, as the selection software is more likely to reject those drawn from groups that are under-represented in society. Finally, restrictions in recruitment during a period of austerity are likely to disadvantage disabled people in general, as they are more likely than non-disabled people to be working in the public sector and austerity measures may reduce the flexibility for employers to offer alternative assessments such as work trials (Adam, Brown and Dong, 2023). The analysis of the recruitment experiences of autistic applicants also contributes toward an advanced understanding of the interaction between the 'social relational model’ and Goffman’s theory of impression management

The literature review examined the influences of three theoretical concepts on the outcomes for autistic interviewees: impression management, stereotyping and person-job/person-organisation fit. In the first of these, the findings were examined in the context of Goffman’s exposition of impression management in *“The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life”* (1959) where Goffman posited that individuals manipulate their appearance and manner to ‘fit in’ with society in order to achieve their aims, based on the collective rules of social behaviour. Goffman made specific reference to the job interview where “*important consequences for the performer will occur as a result of his conduct (and)… often the interviewer will have to make decisions of far-reaching importance for the interviewee on the sole basis of information gained from the interviewee’s interview performance”* (Goffman, 1959, p. 219). According to Goffman, in such encounters we aim to present an ‘idealised’ image of ourselves through ‘impression management’ and a particular ‘front’ would be expected when, for example, undergoing a job interview.

Against this background, the findings indicated that autistic people generally were cognisant of the ‘performance’ expected in the context of a conventional interview - for example, ‘good eye contact’, a firm handshake, positive demeanour and confident responses. As has been found in previous research, however, they were often severely disadvantaged by the nature of their condition, which militated against the very behaviours they were expected to present (Ryan and Wessel, 2008; Davies *et al.*, 2023). An important finding that emerged from this study, however, was the revelation from autistic people that the interview performance obliged them to present not an idealised version of *themselves* – as suggested by Goffman - but rather a *different* identity – that of the neurotypical applicant. Indeed, many autistic participants expressed the view that the ‘face’ of autism was unacceptable to employers and that they needed to project a ‘neurotypical’ identity in both physical appearance and interview responses in order to succeed. This in turn was a source of frustration and some resentment for a number of autistic job seekers. It was evident also that Goffman’s concept of “frontstage” (where one is on view and ‘performs’) and ‘backstage’ (where one is out of sight and relaxes) did not apply in the case of some autistic people, whose sense of identity and presentation of self were immutable (*“I can't really create a different version of myself which I can just use at interviews” (A9).* In such cases the elements of projection and self-promotion suggested by Goffman were not only beyond the innate capability of some but also appeared to be partly bound up with the autistic individual’s belief that to present a *different* self was to compromise one’s integrity. This is consistent with Baron-Cohen’s observation that *“the autistic brain is…the ultimate truth detector”* (Baron-Cohen, 2008b, p. 69). Thus, the research signalled a new perspective on Goffman’s (1959) assertion that as a society we ‘buy into’ the practice of adapting our behaviour to meet the expectations of different audiences, as some autistic participants would argue that it reflected the ‘neurotypical’but not necessarily the ‘autistic’perspective on how society behaves.

Regarding stereotyping, this research shed new light on the current literature on the stereotyping of autistic job applicants. In common with previous findings, the study indicated that autistic job applicants were exposed to a variety of stereotyping, sometimes influenced by portrayals in the media, with common assumptions that all autistic people were male, lacked a sense of humour or were ‘gifted’ (Dillenburger *et al.*, 2013; Pellicano, Dinsmore and Charman, 2014; Wood and Freeth, 2016). The findings went further, however, in identifying what appeared to be in extreme cases a comprehensive ‘transference’ of traits and characteristics, where neurotypical individuals with some experience of an autistic individual would assume that all autistic people would demonstrate exactly the same attributes, strengths and weaknesses irrespective of age, gender or background. This would suggest a perception of autism as a totally homogeneous condition, devoid of individual personality, with none of the unique characteristics expected in the neurotypical population. A further aspect that adds to the literature revealed by this research was that as a consequence of stereotyping, individuals who did not conform to the ‘expected’ profile – particularly females – could be met with suspicion and treated as impostors who were ‘playing the system’, even though they had a clinical diagnosis of autism.

The findings contribute to the literature on person-job fit by garnering employers’ and applicants’ perspectives on the recruitment of autistic candidates. Regarding the type of employment to be undertaken, employers stated in most cases that they would not exclude applicants from any particular role but remarked on observed strengths in autistic employees such as attention to detail, a high level of focus and facility with complex data that made them a ‘good fit’ for jobs such as banking, insurance and financial services. Whilst this endorsement might be advantageous to autistic people seeking employment in those sectors, it was nevertheless a source of frustration for those applying for jobs in the creative, teaching and caring professions who felt that their competencies in these areas were less well recognised and indeed questioned by employers, reinforcing the stereotyping to which they had been exposed elsewhere. These findings therefore contribute to the rather limited literature on the wide variety of occupations that may be undertaken by autistic people (Feinstein, 2018).

This study also contributes to the literature on person-organisation fit in exploring candidates’ and employers’ attitudes to hiring autistic applicants relative to the sector in which the organisation operates – public, private or third sector. Previous research in this area is limited but found that private sector employers were the least likely to engage autistic people. It was surprising, therefore, that the empirical data from this study - specifically in relation to work trials - suggested the contrary. While there were clear examples in the private sector of organisations providing work trials for autistic candidates, public sector organisations argued that - while supportive of them in principle - they lacked the flexibility of the private sector due to factors such as budgetary constraints, possible objections from trade unions and the need to fill posts quickly. This lack of flexibility was evident also in cases where an applicant had applied for a particular post to which they had proved unsuitable but were nevertheless well matched to an alternative position. In the private sector, it was not uncommon for an offer of an alternative job to be made where the candidate’s observed skills could benefit the business. In the public sector, however, HR procedures and restrictions on staff expenditure precluded such action. While labour market intermediaries argued that both positive and negative attitudes might be found in the same sector, and indeed the same organisation, and that the most critical determinant of a successful placement for autistic job seekers was an open-minded approach from the manager and work colleagues, in practice this study found that the work trials that had been offered to autistic participants had been in the private sector.

Although there has been much research on the challenges of the conventional job interview for autistic applicants, consideration of the application of Artificial Intelligence at the initial stages of the selection process appears to have been overlooked. This study reveals how the extensive use of standardised testing and the increasing use of algorithm-based video interviewing impact on both person-job fit and person-organisation fit when screening candidates. Standardised testing such as Situational Judgement Tests (SJTs), for example, is used across a wide range of industries as a mandatory part of the assessment process, particularly when there are high volumes of applicants, to assess person-job fit. While not requiring the same degree of social communication and interaction as the conventional interview, this form of psychometric testing is nevertheless constructed according to certain assumptions that align more with neurotypical than with autistic applicants who are likely to struggle due to problems with ‘Theory of Mind’ (see **chapter 2.4**). Previous literature has alluded to the difficulty for autistic candidates in responding to hypothetical questions (Frith, 1991) and indeed some studies have posited the view that for interviews with autistic applicants, closed questions based on an individual’s past experiences may be preferable to open, hypothetical questions (Townsley *et al.*, 2014). However, existent literature appears not to have addressed the impact on outcomes for autistic people, particularly in relation to person-job fit, when SJTs are used to ‘filter’ applicants in the initial stage of a job application. This study helps to fill that gap.

A similar obstacle for autistic applicants that existing literature appears not to have addressed is the use of Artificial Intelligence software to video job applicants who are screened for Person-Organisation fit. Based on an ideal construct comprising the qualities most valued by that organisation and demonstrated by their ‘successful’ employees, they may analyse speech, ‘micro-expressions’ such as blinking or smiling, as well as posture and body language (Turner, 2018). The findings from this study suggest that such measures may be discriminatory as the autistic applicant is being assessed against a neurotypical model based on an ‘ideal’ company employee. Employers and intermediaries acknowledged that this mechanistic approach could disadvantage autistic applicants who fall outside the neurotypical parameters set by the algorithm.

A critical feature of both SJTs and algorithm-based video interviews is the lack of opportunity for disabled applicants to apply for ‘reasonable adjustments’ due to the standardisation of the assessments. The existing literature appears not to have addressed the negative impact on outcomes for autistic applicants where ‘reasonable adjustments’ are not available. This study found that employers knew that some autistic candidates were completing SJTs - unaware of the hypothetical nature of the questions - then failing, without an opportunity to demonstrate their job fitness. Similarly, employers explained that the software components used to analyse video screenings in algorithm-based interviews could not be modified for the purposes of ‘reasonable adjustments’, even though it was possible that they would disadvantage autistic (and other) candidates. The data from this study revealed the unfairness and ineffectiveness of standardised testing as some applicants had been rejected by standardised testing but were subsequently successful, having requested an alternative form of assessment. Many participants were unclear, however, what options were available to them under ‘reasonable adjustments’, including possible alternative assessments; and employers conceded that these were not widely promulgated.

## 8.4 Positionality and reflexivity

Positionality is a critical awareness of the degree to which a researcher’s background, values, social and professional status may affect their choices and understanding in relation to their qualitative research. It concerns not only how the researcher perceives the world but also how they are perceived, which in turn may influence the level and nature of their engagement with their target audience. Closely aligned with positionality is the concept of reflexivity which involves the continuous questioning of how such beliefs, judgements and persona may have influenced the conduct and outcome of the research (Finlay, 1998).

Positionality and reflexivity are of particular relevance in this study as the researcher has close connections with autistic people and, prior to this study, had some knowledge of the challenges for them in respect of the conventional job interview. The impetus for the research was therefore both academic and personal with the objective of understanding the influences that resulted in the very low levels of selection of autistic job applicants and further, by drawing on those findings, exploring an alternative form of job assessment for this group.

At the outset, the researcher took the view that it was ‘unfair’ that autistic job seekers who were well qualified, well-motivated and had the appropriate skills were unsuccessful in their attempt to secure employment. It was not possible, however, without conducting the qualitative research, to gain an understanding of the precise elements that influenced this outcome. An important consideration when initially deciding on the focus of the research was the degree to which some form of ‘stigmatisation’ on the part of recruiters might affect outcomes. The negative impact of stigmatisation on certain groups in society, including the disabled, are well documented and it was appropriate, therefore, to reflect on whether this was germane to the selection choices made by recruiters, and therefore to be included in the scope of the research. The view taken, however, was that stigmatisation was not the determinant or most significant factor in this scenario. Rather, autistic applicants were less successful at interviews because the nature of the assessment required them to perform well in a skills set in which they were innately disadvantaged due to their medical condition. The absence of any possible stigma against this group would not therefore remove the intrinsic barriers in the selection assessment. Rather, the unfairness or ‘discrimination’ against this group could be attributed to the systemic form of most interviews, which are generally standardised and inflexible, rather than to the predisposition of the interviewer. This in turn led to a consideration of the main dynamics at play in the assessment, namely impression management, stereotyping and person-job/person-organisation fit.

The researcher’s background is that of a former Director of the National Audit Office, a national organisation that produces performance reports on government-wide programmes for scrutiny by Parliament. As such, it was common practice to engage with, and question, senior officials regarding their policies and practice. Outside the authority of that institution, however, there was no guarantee that similar access would be afforded for the purposes of this research. In practice, however, senior members of some major organisations both in the public and private sector, who are in a position to bring about change, were willing to participate. Moreover, employers expressed an interest in receiving a report on the main findings of the research, with some requesting a presentation. This might not have been the case had the researcher been (and had been perceived to be) a junior postgraduate Doctoral Researcher with little experience of industry and commerce.

A further issue that may have engendered certain responses in participants was the fact that the researcher was known to have personal connections with autistic people, including a family member. For autistic participants, this may have encouraged a more open response as they reasoned that they were engaging with an individual with some understanding of the condition who was motivated to bring about practical change, as well as to contribute to existent theory. Indeed, several participants expressed appreciation of that fact. One young participant, however, conveyed her resentment that she had to explain the experiences and challenges of life to the neurotypical world on a daily basis, and suggested that some academics might be exploiting the autistic population to further their academic career without any benefit to research participants. The specific criticisms were unfounded in that she assumed the researcher had been, or would be, paid to undertake the research but it was partly for this reason that it was decided at the outset to pay a fee to autistic participants. This was not so much to counter the particular accusation of exploitation but to reward participants for their contribution, given that so many were unemployed. In practice, a significant number were unaware of the fee, and a few did not wish to receive it, or requested that it be donated to charity. Similarly, the researcher’s personal connection with the research may also have influenced the responses of employers and other stakeholders in different ways. For some, there may have been an obligation to present a more ‘sympathetic’ or ‘positive’ attitude than would otherwise have been the case when discussing autistic applicants, while others may have welcomed the opportunity to discuss possible changes in recruitment practices with someone familiar with some of the challenges and issues involved.

Finally, the question of reflexivity was relevant in considering the contrasting opportunities for autistic job applicants in the public, private and third sector. As someone whose career had been for the most part in the public sector, with a belief in the civic duty and equality of opportunity often associated with public service, the researcher had expected autistic participants to confirm that they had experienced easier access to work in that sector. It was somewhat surprising, therefore, to see this preconception mostly challenged by autistic job seekers. While some believed that they would be treated more ‘sympathetically’ when applying to the public sector (mainly because of equal opportunity statements in job advertisements), and that once in employment they could perhaps rely more on the ‘protection’ of internal regulations governing aspects of inequality, the majority argued that the private sector was more accessible in terms of entering the job market and developing their skills. Their accounts appear to have been confirmed by employers in the public sector who argued that the constraints of the system within which they worked - including budgetary, manpower and trade union issues - did not afford them the same flexibility to offer a work trial or to consider options for an alternative position where applicable, as was more often the case in the private sector.

## 8.5 Recommendations for policy and practice

This research has drawn attention to a number of areas where policy and attendant practices in relation to job interviews appear to disadvantage autistic candidates. The most fundamental of these is the format of the conventional job interview which calls for high levels of communication skills and social interaction, which present major challenges for autistic people due to their innate condition.

Current legislation allows for ‘reasonable adjustments’ for disabled people when attending job interviews (Equality Act 2010) but does not provide for an alternative to the conventional format practised by most employers. Such an approach would appear to perpetuate the ‘medical model’ of disability whereby the onus is on autistic candidates to adapt and adopt certain behaviours to conform to the neurotypical norm in order to succeed. By failing to recognise that conventional interviews may be an inappropriate form of assessment for individuals with a clinical diagnosis of autism, it is argued that current employment legislation does not adequately meet the needs of autistic people, and that consideration should be given to provision within disability legislation for an alternative form of assessment. Autistic participants and stakeholders with experience of supporting autistic job seekers into employment overwhelmingly favoured a form of work trial as the best method for assessing job suitability and sustainable employment.

In addition to the challenges of the conventional job interview for autistic people, the findings of this research reveal the impact of the increasing use of standardised testing such as Situational Judgement Tests on outcomes for autistic applicants. These tests are known to disadvantage autistic applicants and it is incumbent on all employers, therefore, to offer alternatives to the standardised testing and to signpost this in their recruitment literature and websites. For the public sector, in particular, such accommodations should be made available in compliance with their responsibilities under the Public Sector Equality Duty provisions of the Equality Act 2010, which require public sector organisations to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination and advance equality of opportunity (Equality Act, 2010 s 149). Similar considerations apply to algorithm-based video interviews, where the precise contents of the software are unknown to the autistic applicant (and to some employers), and consequently do not lend themselves to ‘reasonable adjustments’. In such cases, alternative forms of assessment should be offered and clearly promulgated to disabled applicants. At present, significant numbers of autistic applicants do not disclose for fear of discrimination but if alternative forms of assessment were made available and clearly advertised, they might be encouraged to do so.

The findings also revealed that, while employers acknowledged the complexity of autism, and in some instances stated their willingness to make the interview process more accessible to autistic people, they were unsure, and sometimes misguided, in what precise steps to take. For example, some employers viewed the ‘Guaranteed Interview Scheme’ as a significant benefit, while candidates argued that they were very often successful in obtaining interviews on the basis of their qualifications (and possibly by not disclosing their autism) but were most disadvantaged at the interview stage. This would indicate a need for human resources departments to gain a better understanding of the autistic condition and to review the consistency of their practices when assessing autistic applicants. In addition, where medium to large organisations outsource recruitment to third parties, employers should monitor whether policies on diversity and inclusion are in place to counteract possible stereotyping and discrimination. Finally, as employers expressed an interest in how to develop procedures in relation to the recruitment of autistic applicants, it is intended to summarise the main findings of this study and to issue practical guidance on the hiring of autistic applicants to participating employers and, where possible, promote this more widely.

## 8.6 Limitations and directions for future research

This study set out to explore the influences and interrelationship of stereotyping, impression management and person-job/ person-organisation fit on outcomes for autistic job applicants, with particular reference to the selection process, and in the light of those findings to consider whether an alternative form of assessment would be more effective for this group of applicants. To that end, evidence was sought from a wide range of stakeholders. Participants were drawn from three different groups: autistic people who had undergone a job interview; professionals who had acted as mentors or coaches to autistic job seekers or who were experts in autism; and employers operating in a range of sectors and industries. The criteria for participation in the first of these groups were a minimum age of 18, a formal diagnosis of autism and experience of at least one job interview. In order to broaden participation as far as possible, autistic candidates were invited from a wide geographical base through coordination with autism groups and charities across the UK, with one participant resident in the United States. This produced a more representative sample in terms of age, gender, geographical spread and interview experience. The sample was nevertheless self-selecting, and it was noticeable that the majority were educated to degree standard. Although the intention had been from the outset to capture individuals who were of an educational level that indicated ‘employability’ (and thus could be benchmarked for employment outcomes against non-autistic groups) they may not be representative of the ‘employable’ autistic population as a whole. As all but one of the participants was based in the UK, future research might be undertaken in other countries to ascertain the extent to which the insights from this thesis are transferable to other contexts.

Moreover, it is significant that participants were invited to be interviewed for the research to discuss *‘*the challenges of being interviewed’(albeit in a different context) and for that reason it may be assumed that many will have been deterred from participating. Indeed, some autistic participants remarked that, although they found the experience to be less stressful than a job interview - because it did not have the same consequences - they nevertheless found the process very challenging due to the social interaction. They were determined to participate, however, because of the nature of the research and the desire to bring about change in the recruitment of autistic people. It may be assumed from the levels of unemployment and underemployment among the participating group that others with fewer qualifications and most importantly, fewer social skills, would experience even greater challenges in securing employment but further research would be needed to examine this assumption.

* + 1. In relation to theory, this study examined Goffman’s concept of impression management as expounded in *“The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life”* (Goffman,1959). The empirical findings challenge the premise that as a society we embrace the idea of adaptive presentation that varies according to one’s audience. In some cases, autistic participants argued that they had only one identity that could not be manipulated to create a desired impression with, for example, prospective employers. Indeed, for them to do so would compromise their integrity. Moreover, they believed that the interview performance obliged them to present not an idealised version of *themselves* – as suggested by Goffman - but rather a *different* identity – that of the neurotypical applicant. This was because the ‘face’ of autism was unacceptable to employers and they needed to project a ‘neurotypical’ identity in both physical appearance and interview responses in order to succeed. Further research could usefully examine the possible limitations of Goffman in this respect and the degree to which he presents a neurotypical perspective of society’s views and expectations that may differ from those of the autistic population.

Representation from employers was drawn from a range of sectors: finance, retail, insurance, the arts and third sector but again was to a certain extent self-selecting, and numbers were small. The challenges of engaging employers in research on disability employment are well-known but further research in this area would provide additional evidence of employers’ attitudes and possible differences in outlook according to the sector in which they operate. In particular, it would be interesting to examine further the rather surprising finding in this research that the private sector appeared to operate more flexibly and was more open to creating more opportunities for autistic applicants. The sample of employers was too small to draw firm conclusions but more detailed research that examined factors such as the impact of budgetary and procedural constraints within the public sector might shed more light on this aspect of recruitment. Similarly, there is scope for further examination of employers in relation to their attitudes to the type of work to which they consider autistic people are suited. The sample of employers in this study mainly confirmed the common perception (based in some cases on their observations of autistic employees in the workplace) that autistic applicants were most proficient in mathematical, scientific and data-based operations, and were less likely to be viewed as successful practitioners in, for example, the arts, or teaching and caring professions. More research in this area would build on the findings in this study on the inter-relationship between stereotyping and Person-job/ Person-organisation fit.

The standardisation and lack of transparency in assessments such as Situational Judgement Tests and algorithm-based video interviews have denied autistic applicants the opportunity to request the ‘reasonable adjustments’ to which they are entitled in law to remove inherent disadvantages, when compared with those who are not disabled. Further research is needed in this area both to ascertain employers’ understanding of the content of these assessments and to measure their impact on the outcomes for autistic and other disabled applicants. Alongside this, there is scope for further examination of the extent to which alternative forms of assessment are made available in practice and, crucially, are made known to autistic applicants. The findings of this study showed that applicants were unaware that in some cases they could apply for alternatives to the standardised assessments, and employers acknowledged that they were not promulgating this information sufficiently in their recruitment literature and websites.

The initial aim of the research was to explore the influences, and interrelationship, of impression management, stereotyping and person-job/ person-organisation fit on outcomes for autistic job applicants, with a particular focus on those seeking to enter the job market. The evidence from participants, however, also indicated that the job interview continued to be an obstacle throughout their working life, since promotion or alternative jobs generally depended on undergoing the same process, even where they had demonstrated their competence and expertise in their chosen field. Consequently, a number of participants felt ‘trapped’ in jobs that they disliked or where they were underemployed because they could not countenance the ordeal of another interview. Further research could usefully shed more light on the extent of this predicament for autistic people in the workplace.

Finally, this research has argued that a different approach to the conventional job interview is called for in assessing sustainable employment for autistic people, with a strong recommendation for work trials. This conclusion emanates from the contributions of the vast majority of participants, including employers, although the latter expressed concerns about the practicalities in some cases of such an approach. Further research is needed to assess the success of work trials versus the conventional job interview in hiring autistic applicants, and to examine the practical and legal implications for employers in adopting this approach. A fundamental part of such research should be consideration of how, given the innate characteristics of autism, the conventional job interview - even with ‘reasonable adjustments’ - is consistent with the Equality Act’s stated objective of protecting disabled groups from discrimination and unfair treatment in relation to employment.

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# Appendix 1: Participant information sheet (autistic participants)

**Overcoming the barriers to employment for people with autism: factors that may affect outcomes for autistic candidates attending job interviews**

Introduction

I am a Doctoral Researcher at Sheffield University and would like to invite you to take part in a research study that explores some of the barriers to employment for people with autism. In particular I would like to focus on job interviews.  Before deciding whether you would like to take part, please read the following information and, if you have any concerns or questions, contact me using the details at the end of this sheet.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of the study is to investigate job interview experiences of people on the autistic spectrum; and from those findings to consider possible alternative selection methods for assessing whether an autistic person is suited to a particular job.

Why have I been invited to take part in the study?

You are being invited to take part, along with about 50 other autistic people, because you have attended a job interview and can therefore provide valuable information regarding your experience and views of the process.

Do I have to take part?

No, you do not have to take part and if you do agree to take part, all your personal details will be kept confidential.

What will I have to do?

I would like to ask you about your experiences of, and views on, job interviews. I will send you the questions in advance and, if you would like further information on them or have any particular requests concerning our meeting, please contact me. I would then like to discuss these experiences with you via an online meeting such as Google Meet that I expect will last for about 45 minutes to one hour. I will then transcribe our conversation.  Your name will not appear on the interview transcript and all details will be destroyed at the end of the research.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

The overall aim of the research is to find out which form of job interview enables people with autism to best show their ability to do a particular job. Your views will contribute to the advancement of research in this area and will be used to promote beneficial changes in current interview practices for people with autism.

Will I be paid for taking part?

Yes, you will receive a one-off payment of £15 for your involvement. Please be aware that suchpayment does not constitute an employment relationship with the University.

What are the possible risks of taking part?

I do not foresee any specific risks. You will not be asked to share any sensitive or personal information and, if during the interview you would like a break, we can stop and resume later or at a different time.

What is the legal basis for processing my personal data?

According to data protection laws, I need to tell you that the legal basis for collecting and using your personal data is that ‘processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest’ (Article 6(1)(e)). Further information can be found at <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general>.’

What will happen to the data collected, and the results of the research project?

As required by law, I will comply with the Data Protection Act (DPA) 1998, General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2018 and the Common Law duty of confidence. All information collected from you will be kept strictly confidential. Only the two professors supervising this research (details given below) and I will have access to your personal data. None of your personal data will be passed to any employer; and only anonymous information that does not identify you will appear in any report. If I later wish to share the data anonymously with other researchers, I will ask for your explicit consent to do so. The anonymised information collected will be stored for ten years and then deleted.

Who is the Data Controller?

The University of Sheffield will act as the Data Controller for this study. This means the University is responsible for looking after your information and using it properly.

Who is organising and funding the research?

The University of Sheffield and myself are responsible for this research.

Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has obtained Ethical Approval via the University of Sheffield’s Ethics Review Procedure, as administered by Sheffield University Management School.

The University of Sheffield’s Research Ethics Committee is responsible for monitoring the application and delivery of the University’s Ethics Review Procedure across the University.

What if something goes wrong and I wish to complain about the research?

If you wish to make a complaint about this research project, please contact Professor Pauline Dibben, Principal Supervisor for this research, p.dibben@sheffield.ac.uk.

If, however, you feel your complaint has not been handled to your satisfaction, please contact Mandy Robertson, Research Support Officer, m.robertson@sheffield.ac.uk who will refer your complaint to the Head of Department.  If you wish to make a complaint in relation to how your personal data has been handled, please follow the guidance in the University’s Privacy Notice: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general

What will happen if I don’t want to carry on with the study?

If after agreeing to take part in the study, you change your mind, you may withdraw without giving a reason. This includes at any time before, during or after the interview until the point where data have been anonymised.  If you withdraw at that point, any data collected from you will not be included in the analysis and will be destroyed.

What happens when the research study stops?

Once the project is complete, the findings will be reported in a PhD publication that may be accessed online. If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to get in touch. I am very happy to explain this project in depth. You may contact me, Jan Lawler MA(Oxon), jlawler1@sheffield.ac.uk (07419136004) or my supervisors, Professor Pauline Dibben p.dibben@sheffield.ac.uk and Professor Paul Latrelle p.latreille@sheffield.ac.uk located at Sheffield University Management School, Conduit Road Sheffield S10 1FL.

# Appendix 2: Participant information sheet (employers)

**Overcoming the barriers to employment for people with autism: factors that may affect outcomes for autistic candidates attending job interviews**

Introduction

I am a Doctoral Researcher at Sheffield University and would like to invite you to take part in a research study that explores some of the barriers to employment for people with autism with a particular focus on job interviews. Before deciding whether you would like to take part, I would be grateful if you could read the following information and, if you have any concerns or questions, please contact me using my details at the end of this sheet.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of the study is to investigate the job interview experiences of people on the autistic spectrum; and from those findings to consider possible alternative methods for assessing whether an autistic person is suited to a particular job.

Why have I been invited to take part in the study?

You have been invited to take part because your organisation has experience of interviewing and selecting job applicants, and will therefore provide valuable information on selection processes from the perspective of employers.

Do I have to take part?

No, you do not have to take part and are free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason. Nevertheless, if you do agree to take part, all personal details and those of your organisation will remain confidential.

What will my involvement entail?

I would like to invite you to take part in an online interview of approximately 45-60 minutes to discuss your organisation’s procedures for job interviews. This would extend (where applicable) to any experience you may have of interviewing people with autism or Asperger’s, although such experience is not a prerequisite for the interview. In order to ensure I have a precise record of the information you provide, I would like to audio record the interview, and I will ask you for your consent regarding this. However, if you do not wish to be recorded, I will take notes. Your name and that of the organisation you represent will not appear on the interview transcripts and notes, and all organisational details will be destroyed.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

The overall aim of the research is to explore with employers and people with autism the form of job interview that enables autistic people to show their ability to do a particular job. Your views will contribute to a greater understanding of the practicalities of differentiating job selection procedures from the perspective of the employer, and advance current research in this area.

What are the possible risks of taking part?

I do not foresee any risk regarding your participation in this project. You will not be asked to share any sensitive or personal information; the details of you and your organisation will not be disclosed; and you are free to withdraw at any point during the study without providing a reason.

What is the legal basis for processing my personal data?

According to data protection laws, I am obliged to inform you that the legal basis for collecting and using your personal data is that ‘processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest’ (Article 6(1)(e)). Further information can be found at <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general>.’

What will happen to the data collected, and the results of the research project?

As required by law, I will comply with the Data Protection Act (DPA) 1998, General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2018 and the Common Law duty of confidence. All information collected from you will be kept strictly confidential. The two professors supervising this research (details given below) and myself are the only individuals who will have access to your personal data; and only anonymous information that does not identify you will appear in any report. If I later wish to share the data anonymously with other researchers, I will ask for your explicit consent to do so. The anonymised information collected will be stored for ten years and then deleted.

Who is the Data Controller?

The University of Sheffield will act as the Data Controller for this study. This means the University is responsible for looking after your information and using it properly.

Who is organising and funding the research?
The University of Sheffield and myself are responsible for this research.

Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has obtained Ethical Approval via the University of Sheffield’s Ethics Review Procedure, as administered by Sheffield University Management School.

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What if something goes wrong and I wish to complain about the research?

If you wish to make a complaint about this research project, please contact Professor Pauline Dibben, who is the Principal Supervisor for the research, p.dibben@sheffield.ac.uk. If, however, you feel your complaint has not been handled to your satisfaction, please contact Mandy Robertson, Research Support Officer, m.robertson@sheffield.ac.uk who will refer your complaint to the Head of Department. If you wish to make a complaint in relation to how your personal data has been handled, please follow the guidance in the University’s Privacy Notice: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general

What will happen if I do not want to carry on with the study?

If after agreeing to take part in the study, you change your mind, you can withdraw at any point without giving a reason. This includes before, during or after the interview process. If you withdraw then any data collected from you will not be included in the analysis and would be destroyed.

What happens when the research study stops?

Once the project is complete, the findings will be reported in a PhD publication that may be accessed online. If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to get in touch. I would be very happy to explain the project in more depth. You may contact me, Jan Lawler MA (Oxon), jlegaller1@sheffield.ac.uk (07419136004) or my supervisors, Professor Pauline Dibben p.dibben@sheffield.ac.uk and Professor Paul Latreille p.latreille@sheffield.ac.uk located at Sheffield University Management School, Conduit Road Sheffield S10 1FL.

**Thank you in advance for considering participation in this project.**

# Appendix 3: Participant information sheet (stakeholders)

**Overcoming the barriers to employment for people with autism: factors that may affect outcomes for autistic candidates attending job interviews**

Introduction

I am a Doctoral Researcher at Sheffield University and would like to invite you to take part in a research study that explores some of the barriers to employment for people with autism with a particular focus on job interviews. Before deciding whether you would like to take part, I would be grateful if you could read the following information and, if you have any concerns or questions, please contact me using my details at the end of this sheet.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of the study is to investigate the job interview experiences of people on the autistic spectrum; and from those findings to consider possible alternative methods for assessing whether an autistic person is suited to a particular job.

Why have I been invited to take part in the study?

You have been invited to take part because your organisation is a stakeholder in the employment of neurodiversity in the workplace and as such will provide a valuable perspective on the job selection of people with autism.

Do I have to take part?

No, you do not have to take part and are free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason. Nevertheless, if you do agree to take part, all personal details and those of your organisation will remain confidential.

What will my involvement entail?

I would like to invite you to take part in an interview of approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour to discuss your organisation’s views and activity in relation to job selection procedures for people with autism. In order to ensure I have a precise record of the information you provide I would like to audio record the interview using a Dictaphone, and I will ask you for your consent regarding this. However, if you do not wish to be recorded, I will take notes. Your name and that of the organisation you represent will not appear on the interview transcripts and notes, and all organisational details will be destroyed.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

The overall aim of the research is to explore with stakeholders, employers and people with autism the form of job interview that enables autistic people to show their ability to do a particular job. Your views will provide valuable background to the current employment landscape for people on the autism spectrum and advance current research in this area.

What are the possible risks of taking part?

I do not foresee any risk regarding your participation in this project. You will not be asked to share any sensitive or personal information; the details of you and your organisation will not be disclosed; and you are free to withdraw at any point during the study without providing a reason.

What is the legal basis for processing my personal data?

According to data protection laws, I am obliged to inform you that the legal basis for collecting and using your personal data is that ‘processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest’ (Article 6(1)(e)). Further information can be found at <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general>.’

What will happen to the data collected, and the results of the research project?

As required by law, I will comply with the Data Protection Act (DPA) 1998, General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2018 and the Common Law duty of confidence. All information collected from you will be kept strictly confidential. The two professors supervising this research (details given below) and myself are the only individuals who will have access to your personal data; and only anonymous information that does not identify you will appear in any report. If I later wish to share the data anonymously with other researchers, I will ask for your explicit consent to do so. The anonymised information collected will be stored for ten years and then deleted.

Who is the Data Controller?

The University of Sheffield will act as the Data Controller for this study. This means the University is responsible for looking after your information and using it properly.

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The University of Sheffield and myself are responsible for this research.

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What will happen if I do not want to carry on with the study?

If after agreeing to take part in the study, you change your mind, you can withdraw at any point without giving a reason. This includes before, during or after the interview process. If you withdraw then any data collected from you will not be included in the analysis and would be destroyed.

What happens when the research study stops?

Once the project is complete, the findings will be reported in a PhD publication that may be accessed online. If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to get in touch. I would be very happy to explain the project in more depth. You may contact me, Jan Lawler MA (Oxon), jlawler1@sheffield.ac.uk (07419136004) or my supervisors, Professor Pauline Dibben p.dibben@sheffield.ac.uk and Professor Paul Latreille p.latreille@sheffield.ac.uk located at Sheffield University Management School, Conduit Road Sheffield S10 1FL.

**Thank you in advance for considering participation in this project.**

# Appendix 4: Participant consent form

****  **Participant consent form**

Overcoming the barriers to employment for people with autism: factors that may affect outcomes for autistic candidates attending interview

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| ***Please tick the appropriate boxes*** | **Select** **Option****Yes/No** |
| **Taking Part in the Project** |  |
| I have read and understood the project information sheet. If you answer No to this question, please do not proceed with this consent form until you are fully aware of what your participation in the project means. |  |  |  |
|  |
| I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.  |  |  |  |
|  |
| I agree to take part in the project. |  |  |  |
|  |
| I agree to be interviewed online via Google Meet and for the interview to be recorded. |  |  |  |
|  |
| I understand that my taking part is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time until such time as the data are anonymised. I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want to take part and there will be no adverse consequences if I choose to withdraw. |  |  |  |
|  |
| I agree that the researcher can seek clarification, if necessary, on points made in the interview after the meeting. |  |  |  |
|  |
| **How my information will be used during and after the project** |  |
| I understand my personal details such as name, phone number, address and email address etc. will not be revealed to anyone outside the project. |  |  |  |
|  |
| I understand that the data arising from my interview may be shared with my supervisory team only. |  |  |  |
|  |
| I understand and agree that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs. I understand that I will NOT BE NAMED in these outputs. |  |  |  |
|  |

 Name of participant Signature Date

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  |

The template of this consent form has been approved by the University of Sheffield Research Ethics Committee and is available to view here: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/further-guidance/homepage>

**If you wish to raise a complaint about the research project, please contact Professor Pauline Dibben, Principal Supervisor for this research, p.dibben@sheffield.ac.uk. However, should you feel your complaint has not been handled to your satisfaction, please contact Mandy Robertson, m.robertson@sheffield.ac.uk. If you wish to raise a complaint in relation to how your personal data has been handled, information on how to raise a complaint can be found in the University’s Privacy Notice:** [**https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general**](https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general)

# Appendix 5: Topic guide questions for autistic participants

**Introduction**

The aim of the research is to learn from people with autism the challenges they face at ‘traditional’ job interviews. In addition, it will consider alternative selection processes that might enable them better to demonstrate their suitability to a job. This may be through adjustments to the “conversational” interview, or through job -related assessments, such as work trials etc. The intention is to use the information gathered to influence the way autistic people are assessed for employment.

These questions cover the main areas of the research. Not all questions will be relevant to you but if you have any additional points you would like to raise, please do so when we have our discussion. For the purposes of data analysis, I would also like to ask you your age, when you received your diagnosis and some educational and employment details. Neither you nor your employer(s) will be identified in the research.

**Job Descriptions**

**1**. Do you have difficulty in understanding job descriptions?

YES/NO

If YES, what problems do you experience in understanding job descriptions?

**2**. When you see the competencies listed in the job description, do you feel you need to meet all of them before applying for the job?

YES/NO

Please give the reasons for your answer.

**3**. Many job descriptions ask for “good communication skills” or similar. Do you see that as a barrier to applying?

YES/NO

If YES, why?

**Situational Judgement Tests**

(In these tests you are given different situations that you might encounter in the job for which you are applying. For each situation, there are several possible actions and you are asked to choose the most appropriate option, or to rank them).

**4**. When applying for a job, have you been asked to complete a situational judgement test?

YES/NO

If YES, did you have any difficulties with the questions?

If YES, please describe your difficulties.

**Job Interviews**

**5**. When was the last job interview you attended?

**6**. What job were you applying for, and what was the name of the organisation and the nature of the business (this will not be revealed in the research)?

**7**. Did you state on your application form that you had autism or Asperger Syndrome?

YES/NO

If NO, why not?

**8.** Did you disclose at a later stage (e.g., when you were offered an interview or a job) to your potential employer that you had autism or Asperger Syndrome?

YES/NO

If YES, when?

**9**. Did you ask for any “reasonable adjustments” to the interview process either before or during the interview?

YES/NO

If YES, what “reasonable adjustments” did you request?

Did the organisation make the adjustments to your satisfaction?

YES/NO

If NO, what did they fail to do?

How did that affect the way you were able to perform at interview?

**10**. If you did not ask for any “reasonable adjustments”, did you consider it but decide against it?

YES/NO

If YES, why did you decide not to ask for any adjustments?

**11**. Do you think employers have preconceived ideas about people with autism?

YES/NO

If YES, what do you think these are?

And did that affect the way you behaved at interview?

**12.** Have you experienced any “stereotyping” of autism at interview or in your current or previous employment?

YES/NO

If YES, please explain the nature of the stereotyping.

**13**. Did you think about the type of organisation you were applying to (as well as the job) and whether you would fit in?

YES/NO

If YES, what aspects of the organisation did you consider?

**14**. Do you think any particular sector (private, public or third sector) is a better employer of people with autism?

YES/NO

If YES, which one and why?

**15**. Thinking back to the interview, was there anything at the premises you attended, or in the interview room, that affected your ability to concentrate or answer the interviewer’s questions? (This might be noises in or outside the room, strong or poor lighting, certain smells or colours or another form of distraction).

YES/NO

If YES, what was it and how did it affect you?

**16**. Do you prefer a formal interview setting (e.g., in an office with table and chairs rather than an informal setting such as a staffroom with low seating/ coffee tables etc.)?

YES/NO

If YES, why?

If NO, why not?

**17**. Do you have difficulty with auditory processing?

YES/NO

If YES, how does that affect you at interviews?

**18**. Do you sometimes have difficulty understanding the questions you are asked at interview (e.g., hypothetical questions)?

YES/NO

If YES, please explain.

If YES, did you tell the interviewer that you did not understand the question?

YES/NO

If YES, did they clarify the question so that you understood in the end?

YES/NO

If you did NOT ask the interviewer to clarify the question, why not?

**19**. Do you think it is important to maintain eye contact with the interviewer(s) during the interview?

YES/NO

If NO, why not?

Do you have difficulty maintaining eye contact?

YES/NO

**20**. Did you think the interview allowed you to demonstrate that you were able to do the job you applied for?

YES/NO

If YES, why?

If NO, why not?

**21**. Were you asked to carry out any tasks related to the job description as part of the interview (for example, a computer-based exercise)?

YES/NO

If YES, what were you asked to do?

Did you find the tasks easier to cope with than answering the interview questions?

YES/NO

If YES, why?

If NO, why not?

**22**. Do you feel able to “sell” yourself at interviews?

YES/NO

If NO, why not?

**23**. Have you attended an assessment centre or been required to “role play” as part of an interview?

Please describe your experience(s).

**24**. Overall what effect (before, during or after) do interviews have on you (e.g., anxious/ distressed/ frustrated/)?

**25**. Instead of the “traditional” interview, some employers give autistic applicants job-based tasks or a work trial for a week or more. Would you prefer to be assessed through job-based tasks or a work trial rather than a conventional interview?

Job-based tasks YES/NO

Work trial/placement YES/NO

If YES, why?

If NO, why not?

**26**. (For those who have succeeded in getting a job through a work trial or job-related tasks)

How did this experience compare with a “traditional” interview?

(For example, was it more or less stressful than a “typical” interview?)

Do you think it allowed you to show you had the skills to do the job better than a “conventional” interview?

YES/NO

If YES, why?

If NO, why not?

**27.** Is there anything else you would like to add regarding the challenges of the “traditional” job interview and the type of assessment that would allow you to show an employer you could do the job (conventional, task-based, work placement or other)?

# Appendix 6: Topic guide questions for employers

1. Record of employing people with autism in the organisation

- how many/ not known?

- in which occupations?

2. Perceptions of autism (*stereotyping*)

- are autistic people seen as *suited* to particular jobs within the organisation?

- are autistic people *targeted* for certain jobs within the organisation?

- to what extent, if any, has your experience of autistic employees affected your attitude to prospective autistic applicants?

3. Methods of recruitment/selection

- what is the normal selection process?

- does the organisation employ any Artificial Intelligence software to assess applicants?

- are adjustments to the normal selection process made for autistic people (at the organisation’s or the individual’s instigation)?

- to what extent do the skills tested at interview relate to those needed in the post advertised?

- have you considered a different approach to testing the job fitness of autistic applicants?

 4. Person-job fit and person-organisation fit

- to what extent do you consider whether an applicant will fit in with (the culture and values of) the organisation?

- are there circumstances where you might consider an applicant is well suited to the advertised post but is rejected because he/she is not suited to the organisation?

5.. Performance (impression management)

- expected behaviours at interview (dress, demeanour, verbal facility)

- do autistic people perform differently from neurotypical candidates at interview?

- to what extent do *behaviours* at interview influence the selection decision?

# Appendix 7: Topic guide questions for stakeholders

1.What general understanding do employers have of the autistic condition?

2. To what extent have you come across employers making comments regarding the positive or negative assumed attributes of autistic employees?

*Possible prompt*:

Comments that autistic volunteers in my research have received include, ‘Autistic people have anger management problems’, ‘You’ll need someone with you’, and (in relation to bookkeeping), ‘You won’t make any mistakes’.” Have you come across similar comments to these, or others?

3. What are the main concerns of employers regarding employing people on the spectrum?

4. To what extent is their decision to hire or not to hire made for business case reasons?

5. To what extent is their decision to hire or not to hire made for philanthropic reasons?

6. To what extent is their decision to hire or not to hire dependent on the attitudes of current employees (particularly potential managers)?

7. Do attitudes of employers vary depending on whether they are from the public/private/third sector?

8. Do employer attitudes change or stay the same once they have experience of an autistic employee?

9. Is there confusion about the labels ‘autistic’ and ‘Aspergers’? To what extent is the label ‘Asperger’ helpful or unhelpful?

10. What in your experience has been the most effective way of getting employers to consider hiring an autistic person?

11. Most of the people I have interviewed did not want to disclose their autism on the job application form (anecdotal evidence of getting fewer invitations to interview if they did) and preferred to raise it at interview or after they had received a job offer. To what extent is this a positive or negative move by autistic candidates?

12.(Related to 8 above) How do employers react to requests for reasonable adjustments?

13. To what extent are requests for adjustments seen by employers as a positive or negative indication of how easy an employee will be to manage?

14. To what extent is the traditional interview discriminatory against autistic people? (*prompt*- autistic people are expected to master neurotypical skills the absence of which defines their very condition)?

15. To what extent Are reasonable adjustments to the recruitment process sufficient in order to fairly recruit autistic people?

16. What is your opinion on using task-based assessments and work trials for everyone (including autistic people)?

17. To what extend does an interview assess an applicant’s ability to do the job?

18. To what extent is there a two-tier recruitment system emerging for people on the spectrum for those on the spectrum who have high support needs and those with low support needs who might be viewed as exceptionally able? (Prompt- those exceptionally able in IT, coding etc. are cherry picked by high-tech firms but others are making much less progress in penetrating the job market)

19. To what extent do opportunities for employment appear to diminish or improve as autistic people grow older? (Prompt: I was wondering if they might diminish, due to a chequered (or no) employment record. One volunteer in his forties said his CV read like that of a 20-year-old because of part-time, short-term, low-skilled work. How much more difficult is it to secure employment for people in this category?

20. Is “underemployment” common or not common in your experience (*prompt*: many of those I have spoken to are graduates but work in low-skilled and often part-time work)?

# Appendix 8: Profile of autistic participants

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Gender** | **Education** | **Age** | **Age of****Diagnosis** | **BAME** | **Employed** | **Notes** |
| 1 | M | 4 | 21 | 7 | No | PG student | P/T cleaning/customer service job |
| 2 | F | 1 | 56 | 53 | No | No | Left employment to care for autistic children |
| 3 | M | 3 | 42 | 33 | No | No | ADHD which in his view was greater barrier than autism to getting work |
| 4 | F | 4 | “40s” | (Age not given but diagnosed 2 years earlier) | Yes | P/T  | White non-British with English as second language. Self- employed (as Spanish tutor) as does not wish to attend job interviews |
| 5 | F | 3 | “50s” | In 2020 | No | No |  |
| 6 | M | 3 | 41 | 37 | No |  F/T | Overqualified - entry level clerical job |
| 7 | M | 1 | 61 | 52 | No | No  | Some voluntary work |
| 8 | M | 3 | 47 | 45 | No | No | Some voluntary work; independent means, not actively seeking work |
| 9 | M | 2 | 28 | 21 | No | F/T  |  |
| 10 | M | 2 | 25 | 24 | No | No | Previously had short-term customer service roles.  |
| 11 | M | 3 | 47 | 37 | No | No  | Occasional low-paid work e.g., Christmas post, film extra |
| 12 | M | 3 | 26 | 9 | No | No | Voluntary work and inactive “zero hours” contract |
| 13 | M | 0 | 30 | 24 | No | Undergraduate | Left school without qualifications due to autism-related issues, accepted as mature student for BA |
| 14 | M | 2 | 24 | 24 | No | Undergraduate | Unsuccessful in applying for P/T retail jobs   |
| 15 | F | 4 | 46 | 44 | No | P/T  | Overqualified – school dinner lady |
| 16 | F | 3 | 40 | 38 | Yes | No) | White non-British with English as a second language, unable to work since 2017 due to mental health |
| 17 | F | 3 | 30 | 15 | No | No  | Some voluntary work |
| 18 | F | 1 | 57 | 55 | No | P/T |  |
| 19 | F | 4 | 32 | 32 | No | F/T  | Overqualified - works in Amazon warehouse |
| 20 | M | 4 | 44 | 43 | No | F/T |  |
| 21 | F | 4 | 51 | 38 | No | P/T | Self-employed lifeguard/ first aid trainer |
| 22 | F | 4 | 50 | 37 | No | F/T |  |
| 23 | F | 3 | 27 | 20 | No | F/T |  |
| 24 | F | 2 | 23 | 21 | No | No | Due to start university in October 2021 |
| 25 | F | 4 | 27 | 20 | Yes | F/T |  |
| 26 | F | 4 | 37 | 36 | No | P/T | Currently on sick leave due to mental health |
| 27 | M | 2 | 50 | 47 | No | P/T  | Self-employed (electrician/technician) as unsuccessful in job interviews |
| 28 | F | 4 | 27 | 22 | Yes | P/T  | White non-British, English as a second language |
| 29 | F | 4 | 45 | 45 | No | F/T |  |
| 30 | M | 3 | 56 | 51 | No | No  | Some voluntary work |
| 31 | M | 4 | 37 | 33 | No | F/T |  |
| 32 | M | 4 | 60 | 47 | No | F/T | Five degrees and MBA. Overqualified in customer service role |
| 33 | F | 4 | 45 | 42 | No | No |  |
| 34 | F | 2 | 44 | 41 | No | F/T |  |
| 35 | F | 3 | 52 | 47 | No | P/T | Overqualified - Civil Servant, who following a break, returned to a job several grades lower because of difficulties with the recruitment process |
| 36 | F | 4 | 41 | 36 | No | P/T | Self-employed |
| 37 | F | 4 | 35 | 15 | No | F/T |  |
| 38 | M | 4 | 62 | 61 | No | No  |  |
| 39 | M | 3 | 37 | 36 | Yes | F/T |  |
| 40 | F | 3 | 59 | 54 | No | F/T  | Overqualified - low-level clerical work |
| 41 | M | 3 | 34 | 3 | No | F/T  | Employed by father |
| 42 | F | 4 | 44 | 41 | No | No |  |
| 43 | F | 2 | 34 | 23 | No | No  | Some voluntary work |
| 44 | M | 4 | 37 | 37 | No | P/T  | Overqualified – junior administrative role |
| 45 | F | 4 | 27 | 22 | No | No | Unemployed. Master’s in Social Research |
| 46 | M | 3 | 29 | 24 | Yes | P/T |  |
| 47 | F | 4 | 44 | 41 | No | P/T  |  |
| 48 | F | 2 | 19 | 18 | Yes | Undergraduate |  |
| 49 | F | 1 | 53  | 51 | No | No |  |
| 50 | F | 4 | 42 | 37 | Yes | F/T  | White non-British, English as a Second Language. Overqualified – data entry role. |
| 51 | F | 2 | 38 | 45 | No | P/T |  |
| 52 | M | 3 | 26 | 21 | No | F/T | Currently in non-graduate work; about to take one year contract in graduate post |

# Appendix 9: Profile of employers and stakeholders

Employers (E1-8) \*

1. US multinational financial services company
2. Small regional charity
3. UK high street brand
4. Publicly–funded government body
5. British multinational retailer
6. Non-departmental public body specialising in the arts
7. Major insurance company
8. UK Research Council

Stakeholders (S1-9) \*

1. Leading US expert on autism

2. Trade union representative

3. Principal of a Further Education College for autistic students

4. Coach mentor and employment consultant

5. Labour market intermediary for autistic job seekers

6. Representative of non-departmental public body working with industry

7. Chairman of company that seeks out employment opportunities for high-

 functioning autistic candidates

1. Psychologist who works with autistic school leavers
2. Historian and author of autism-related topics
* As denoted in the findings
1. The percentage of postgraduate (taught) graduates in full-time employment was 42%. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cultural differences may also be relevant in job interviews: Coget (2014, p. 1) reported that *“Americans …are socialized to self-enhance their individual contributions, whereas Japanese are socialized to focus on the group and not exaggerate their individual contributions”*. However, whilst this research will consider gender, it will not extend to a broader examination of intersectionality, including cultural issues. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Applicants are presented with a description of a work problem related to the job they are applying for and are required to identify how they would handle it. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In this context “labour market intermediary” refers to someone in a not-for-profit organisation who helps autistic individuals with job applications, advising and engaging directly with potential employers, in order to assist the recruitment process. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “Music” (2021) tells the story of a teenage non-verbal autistic girl. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A character in an American sitcom “The Big Bang Theory” who was perceived by many as autistic. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)