

Neurodiversity in Academia: The Autistic advantage in qualitative research

Across society, higher education and research, neurodivergent people face barriers to working and achieving their aims. In this post, Helen Kara and Aimee Grant, draw on their experience to discuss how being Autistic has enhanced their approaches to qualitative social science and suggest how research environments can be improved to make them more inclusive of neurodivergence.

Autistic people are often viewed as defective, difficult and disruptive, which may have something to do with our employment rates being disproportionately low. Recent ONS figures show that [Autistic people have the lowest employment rates of any Disabled people in England](#). However, the world is slowly waking up to the fact that with the appropriate support, Autistic people are an [asset to the workplace](#), with some professional roles particularly suited to Autistic strengths. We argue that qualitative research is one of these professional contexts where Autistic people can flourish.

As two late-diagnosed Autistic women who are also qualitative research experts, we were well positioned to think through this topic. We took a strengths-based approach, using the [Autistic Advantage](#), to emphasise the ways in which Autistic people can enhance the social structures around them. Strengths of Autistic people which are relevant for qualitative research include:

- **Hyperfocus and Autistic 'flow'**, which enable us to get a lot done in small periods of time – useful when timescales and budgets are tight (which they often are).
- **Attention to detail** – useful when designing research, coding data, and managing budgets.
- **Creative thinking** – always useful, but perhaps particularly when analysing data and identifying patterns, connections, and links.
- **Autistic empathy** – which may be higher than that experienced by neurotypical people – useful in supporting colleagues, participants, and other stakeholders.
- **Loyalty** – useful for employers and research teams in retaining organisational memory.

For these reasons, [we argue](#) that within qualitative research, there is an Autistic Advantage. However, the extent of this advantage depends on the work context. In July 2021 the UK Government published its [national strategy for improving the lives of Autistic people](#), which has a chapter about supporting more Autistic people into employment. So far, so good, but it says little about how that can or should be done. We collected and studied literature on how to work effectively with Autistic people, and combined the key points with our own experience. This allowed us to develop practical advice on how to create employment conditions for the Autistic Advantage to flourish, based on the themes of supporting Autistic colleagues, managing Autistic staff, and policies and accessibility services:

Supporting Autistic colleagues

A phrase often repeated is that [if you have met one Autistic person, you have met one Autistic person](#). This is shorthand for the heterogeneity in impairments and needs between Autistic people (and Disabled people more generally), and the need for individualised approaches.

That said, in general, we recommend that you use direct, unambiguous communication with Autistic colleagues. Many Autistic people will prefer that you supplement important verbal communication with written information. For example, before a meeting circulate an agenda and after a meeting circulate notes containing actions and salient points.



Managing Autistic staff

Before any 'problem' is identified, managers should ask about needs relating to communication and sensory issues, and satisfy those needs where possible. Managers should treat each report of disabling symptoms and requests for adjustments seriously, even if they do not find those symptoms or requested adjustments to be typical based on their knowledge. Disabled people are not a homogeneous group and solutions to impairments are not 'one size fits all'. Disability related accommodations are also not a luxury. Even if it is something that might be 'nice to have' for neurotypical colleagues, it is likely to be truly necessary for an Autistic person to work at their best ability, and may well increase productivity in the long term.

Flexibility is also beneficial. What a Disabled person can do on one day, they may not be able to do on another day. We Disabled people are the experts on our own energy levels and fatigue. In the long run, a flexible approach to our workload is likely to increase productivity. If adjustments are removed or not working properly, Disabled people are likely to be less productive, to use more energy to compensate, or to be at risk of 'burnout'.

Policies and accessibility services

If you are a manager of a Disabled person, it is usually your responsibility to advocate for the adjustments they require. Whilst doing this, be sensitive to data protection laws; never share details of any Disabilities without permission.

Managers may turn to organisational disability policies for support, but these may be rooted in ableism, and may not account for neurodivergence. Additionally, within universities, you may have experience of using Disability Services to support students, but these are generally not available to staff. Instead, Occupational Health services are often the first port of call, but staff are unlikely to be expert in neurodivergence. There are experts in neurodivergence who can provide bespoke workplace assessments. In the UK, Access to Work, part of the Department for Work and Pensions commission assessments and packages of support are available to those with a Disability (including being Autistic, Dyslexic and other forms of neurodivergence).

There is an appetite for change in higher education and for creating working environments that empowers neurodiversity beyond adjustments for individuals. Our article was published in November this year and we began tweeting about it the following day. We were not prepared for the astonishing level of interest it generated. Aimee's [original tweet](#) was well received, sparking a range of responses. There were also many other tweets, emails, and messages – every single one supportive. We hope our advice – contained in the [article](#) and in this blog – will help Autistic researchers, their colleagues and managers to work together in a mutually supportive environment. Furthermore, as two privileged senior researchers, we wanted to show the 'people behind the papers' to reassure other Disabled researchers that they are not alone, and to challenge myths that Autistic people do not make good employees.

There are still too many instances of ableism and discrimination in the employment experiences of Autistic people. It will take many years and significant societal and political change for the Autism-employment gap to be eliminated. Support for Disabled and other marginalised academics is often performative rather than substantive – as reflected, for example, in pay gaps and disability accommodations that are poorly implemented or not implemented at all. Overall, our message is: Autistic people can be a real asset to research teams, and we need accommodations to enable us to flourish. Although managers are responsible for accommodations in many research teams, colleagues can also help by using relevant parts of our advice.

Acknowledgement: *This blog post is based on an [article](#) published in [Contemporary Social Science](#), the journal of the [Academy of Social Sciences](#), who kindly waived the Open Access fee for our article. We wish to thank the anonymous reviewers who gave us kind and helpful input; if you are one of them, thank you! The editors [John Connolly](#) and [Jacqueline Barnes](#), told us, “We were very pleased to publish your article as it helps to shine an important light into the experiences and challenges that face researchers.”*

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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