



## 'Pioneers of professional frontiers': the experiences of autistic students and professional work based learning

Jo Sullivan

To cite this article: Jo Sullivan (2021): 'Pioneers of professional frontiers': the experiences of autistic students and professional work based learning, *Disability & Society*, DOI: [10.1080/09687599.2021.1983414](https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2021.1983414)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2021.1983414>



© 2021 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 11 Nov 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 179



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# 'Pioneers of professional frontiers': the experiences of autistic students and professional work based learning

Jo Sullivan

Lecturer in Adult Nursing, School of Health and Society, University of Salford, Salford, Great Manchester, UK

## ABSTRACT

Universities have embraced a culture of inclusivity and diversity when recruiting students for professional degrees (degree study that is likely to result in accreditation to a profession-specific body). Gender, ethnicity, background and disability should no longer be considered a barrier to the offer to undertake study within a HE institution. Students identified as autistic are part of this group; however, anecdotally, when undertaking work-based learning (WBL), attrition rates are high. This phenomenological study examined the WBL experiences of undergraduate students identified as autistic who have chosen professional degree study. Despite the demonstration of immense personal attributes that any profession would value, this group faces discrimination and stereotyping of their persona. Research was conducted with participants all identified as autistic; drawn from a range of undergraduate professional degrees: policing, teaching, journalism, social work and psychology. A number of themes emerged that offer insight into the barriers for success for these individuals, and the personal cost of being autistic in organisations heavily influenced by a deficit model of disability.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 15 August 2020  
Accepted 17 September 2021

## KEYWORDS

Autism; professional degree; work-based learning; ableism; barriers to success; social camouflaging

## Points of interest

- This work examines the experiences of autistic university students on work-based learning placements as part of a professional degree.
- This research includes only the voices of autistic individuals, describing their experiences and the challenges they faced, rather than the thoughts and opinions of those who support students.
- This work offers insight into the prejudice faced by autistic individuals wanting to enter a graduate profession, the challenges they face, the

**CONTACT** Jo Sullivan  [J.M.Sullivan@salford.ac.uk](mailto:J.M.Sullivan@salford.ac.uk)

© 2021 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

efforts they make to appear 'normal' and the constant need to explain themselves in order to 'fit in'.

- This research suggests that students with autism can be of great benefit to their chosen profession.
- Autistic individuals display a strong work ethic, pushing against boundaries and displaying the courage to stand up and make a professional difference to other people's lives,

## Introduction

Nationally, university attendance has increased (UCAS 2018a). This change has been created from a neo-liberalist political agenda of equity (Davies and Bansel 2007); individuals from any part of society should be able to access the transformational power of education, increasing social mobility and economic status (Dearing 1997). A newly emerging group influencing this diversity are individuals with a disability. Recent estimates suggest that within student populations the number of individuals with a disability is approximately 30,000 each year (UCAS 2018b). As part of this group, autistic individuals are the fastest growing section; there has been a 200% increase from 2008 to 2015 (Chown et al. 2018). Although eminently capable with many highly employable attributes, autistic individuals struggle to gain employment. A university degree statistically will increase employment opportunities (Ohl et al. 2017) and therefore position individuals more favourably for meaningful career choices. Although a degree may be of benefit, employment outcomes for autistic graduates are significantly worse than for non-autistic graduates (Vincent 2020)

What is apparent is that students who are identified as autistic, struggle to succeed in placement and have large attrition rates (Douglas et al. 2015). Much research exists regarding wider reasons for student attrition (Cherastidtham, Norton, and Mackey 2018; Dupéré et al. 2019; Aina et al. 2018) and how HE institutions can provide successful learning environments for students from diverse backgrounds (Stone 2017; Thomas 2016; Crosling 2017); however, little information is available which specifically examines the journey of an autistic student through the challenging landscape of a professional degree.

This study examines how autistic students experience a diverse range of work-based placements, which are part of the undergraduate study they have chosen at university. Work-based learning (WBL) is an established element to professional degrees and offers students 'real-life' experience in a workplace they hope to join on successful completion of their studies. For professional degrees, successful WBL outcomes may be a prerequisite for qualification. Frequently WBL will contain assessments that students will need to complete to progress with their studies. All the occupations

included in this study were professions that deal with members of the public who may be undergoing extreme human experiences: (bereavement, violence, abuse, psychological trauma); areas of work that are not traditionally considered most 'suitable' as an autistic career choice (Richards 2012; Hurley-Hanson, Giannantonio, and Griffiths 2020). This research was positioned within an emancipatory approach; it was interested in scrutinising the participants' 'voice' and lived experience of work-based learning (WBL). It did not ask a direct question but sought to form an understanding of the thoughts, feelings and opinions of individuals as they journeyed through a demanding professional course. The research was not, therefore, concerned with the thoughts and opinions of wider organisational stakeholders.

Little research exists that examines the work-based element to professional degrees, particularly in the context of autism. Existing research also rarely represents the direct voice of an autistic individual (Chown et al. 2017). This work examined organisational responses to their differences, and whether students found these environments either enabling or disabling (Pfeiffer et al. 2017) and what they felt were the main barriers to their success. This study aimed to include students undertaking any professional degree, e.g. teachers, police officers, etc. as well as any other student who spent time in professional work-based settings.

Students may need to undertake formal assessments to successfully complete work-based competencies, many of which are based around professional conduct and displaying professional values. Anecdotally, this element to assessment appears the most troublesome, with deeply held neurotypical interpretations of what professionalism means and how it presents in individuals (Hoeve, Jansen, and Roodbol 2014).

This was a small-scale phenomenological study with two methods of data collection which participants chose between: a questionnaire or semi structured interviews. The latter included options such as face to face, email and Skype. This was to offer participants a choice as to how their views were collected. Some candidates may have felt they could speak less frankly if they engage in an interview, whereas others may have taken the opportunity to share their thoughts and opinions with the researcher. Narrative data was then collected by audio tape and fully transcribed. Following collection and scrutiny, an interpretative phenomenological analysis was undertaken (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009). Commonality was sought and three major themes emerged from the findings.

The author uses both identity first language (IFL) and person first language (PFL) throughout this article and full acknowledgement is given to autistic individuals for their preference of IFL. This terminology was chosen in an attempt to enhance the fluency of this paper, and not to cause offence to individuals.

### ***Research process***

The research aimed to stay as closely as possible to the participants' view of the situations they found themselves in (Creswell and Poth 2017). This interpretivist lens was aiming to be emancipatory (Chown et al. 2017); little evidence exists around our understanding of Autism that is directly narrated by autistic individuals themselves. A social constructive framework offers the opportunity to acknowledge the social complexities of interactions and deductively navigate the dynamic responses individuals have to experience. Social meaning is constructed through interactions with others, cultural constructs and historical norms, this is not a passive experience but one which informs and changes us (Denzin and Lincoln 2011). If we are to truly design inclusive and meaningful HE courses then we must fully understand the perceptions of the students undertaking those courses.

### ***Approach to the enquiry***

A qualitative phenomenological approach was used to gain insight into the shared experiences of work-based learning. This approach was considered most suitable as phenomenological study offers the opportunity to collaboratively develop a shared 'essence' of a phenomenon; only individuals who have experienced phenomena can communicate and share them with others. This was chosen in an attempt to identify a common meaning of what it is like to undertake working experiences as an individual with autism and, by collating information, gain the essence of what this means for those individuals (Van Manen 2001).

By placing individual experiences at the core of the research the aim is to elevate the emancipatory intention of this work; it is not to re package experiences but to represent them collectively in a manner that adequately portrays the truth of the experience (Denscombe 2014). Autistic individuals interpret the world differently (Milton and Bracher 2013); if this is acknowledged with integrity, then a phenomenological approach can be seen as ideal. Multiple versions of complex events and the challenge of competing realities can provide much greater insight into why things work the way they do; there is often not an easy solution to problems and challenges identified by the research.

### ***Participant recruitment***

Due to the chosen research approach a purposeful sampling strategy (Denscombe 2014) was used to recruit participants. Advertisements clearly stated that the research was looking to engage individuals formally identified as autistic or who self-identified as autistic; all participants had received a formal diagnosis and disclosed their status to their organisations prior to commencing study.

Sample size also needs consideration; this was a small-scale study that was strictly time limited; restrictions were placed on where participants could be recruited from. Polkinghorne (1989) recommends a minimum of 5 participants to be interviewed who have experienced a phenomenon; this, coupled with organisational restrictions and advertisement timelines, informed the final number of participants recruited; in total five individuals were interviewed.

All participants were anonymized, and pseudonyms assigned to them: 'Dom' was undertaking a Policing Degree, 'Jay' a Teaching Degree, 'Cal' undertook a Journalism Degree, 'Dannii' a Social Work Degree and 'Izzy' a Clinical Psychology Degree.

Multiple locations were used to recruit potential participants; universities, where programme leads for professional programmes were emailed, university alumni groups, local and regional autism adult support groups (where group leaders were contacted) and via posts on social media including student forums and support groups as well as posts on Facebook.

With all approaches for recruitment, a participant information sheet was provided, coupled with a short video clip of the researcher outlining the research project and inviting participants. This was an attempt to personalise the recruitment process; asking individuals who are unfamiliar with the researcher to give up their time and discuss experiences is problematic (Cridland et al. 2015). Despite a minimal sample size, a range of undergraduate subjects were recruited, this offered opportunity to explore commonality despite the diversity of subjects studied.

Although 'self-identified' individuals were invited to join the research, all participants were formally diagnosed with autism. Self-identified individuals were included in the profile in an attempt to be fully inclusive; issues and barriers to formal diagnosis for autism are well documented (Sansosti, Lavik, and Sansosti 2012; Hurt et al. 2019; Jones et al. 2014). Recruitment for this project was directly influenced by the literature review undertaken; it was aimed at students who had spent time in work-based learning. There is a paucity of research in this area, with very little literature existing that provides a direct personal testimony of the experience. This was an attempt to explore the lived experience of becoming a professional and scrutinise themes of professionalism and conformity in a diverse range of professional settings.

### ***Research methods***

None of the participants involved in this study opted for the questionnaire, all agreed to be interviewed. Interviews were taped in order to allow all conversational content to be gathered ready for data analysis. Taping the interviews offered a way of capturing all the verbal content; but of course, does not record non-verbal interaction or any visual signs from the

participant. To address this, field notes were also taken. Multi-part questions were avoided in an effort to encourage fluency of an individual's own narrative; however, the very presence of a recording device inevitably alters human dynamics (Petrova, Dewing, and Camilleri 2016). It was observed by the researcher that as time elapsed individuals became much less conscious of this and appeared to speak freely.

One to one interviews also offer the privacy and space for participants to openly explore their own thoughts without wider group dynamics needing to be considered (Creswell and Poth 2017); and the researcher can clearly identify the source of any thoughts and emerging themes from the questions. Van Manen (2001) also suggests that it can be much easier to talk than write about personal experience; speaking allows a flow and a closeness to the experience as it is immediately lived.

There are some inevitable drawbacks with interviews; people may respond differently depending on how they perceive the person asking the questions. Gender, age and ethnic background will have an impact on the amount of information a participant is likely to divulge (Dempsey et al. 2016). The 'subject' and 'researcher' dichotomy is heavily researched and does have epistemological implications; however, Taylor (2011) argues that a relationship with any participant is essential in the development of empathy and insight.

### *Data collection and analysis*

Data was collected over a three-month period and following the taping of interviews, data was prepared for analysis using orthographic transcription; and an attempt was made to remain as accurate as possible to the original recording. Following this, transcripts were highlighted and significant statements were identified across all transcripts in an attempt to accurately 'see meaning'(Van Manen 2001). The identification of such statements was based on the repetition of words, phrases or descriptive nouns that were used by the majority of participants in response to a question (Moser and Korstjens 2018). The researcher noted the definitive use of words that were often emotional and emotive in nature; to justify the categorising of 'significant' the tone, fluency, emphasis and emotion of the delivery was also noted from the taped interview along with the field notes made during Skype interviews regarding gesticulation and body language and semiotic presentations of participants (Thiel, John, and Frahsa 2019).

This helps to develop clusters of meaning (Moustakas 1994). An interpretivist phenomenological analysis (IPA) on the data was then undertaken (Smith 1996). The scrutiny of data will involve a dual analytical process; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants making sense of their experience (Pietkiewicz and Smith 2014). This approach is not without its challenges, research cannot fully access a participant's world directly;

therefore, meaning is interpreted by another but can offer some insight into the significant life experiences of becoming a professional.

### ***Research limitations***

This research was undertaken by a neurotypical researcher, who is likely to have a differing interpretation on body language and phraseology of words (National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE) 2016). Although similarities may exist, this could have profound effects on the interpretation of data collected. The researcher also acknowledges the small sample size as limiting the impact of this study (although 5 participants were recruited, as suggested by Polkinghorne); due to time limitations and the size of the project, small numbers only could be facilitated. A fundamental issue with recruitment is the nature and 'cost' to individuals of disclosure, this is a highly relevant factor in limiting the scope of this research; individuals who may have been interested in participation could feel inhibited due to the perceived risks of disclosure. Although all participants were fully anonymised, all reflected on very personal and difficult emotional experiences they had during the course of their WBL. A theme that has been identified in the review of literature for this project is the reluctance of individuals in any professional setting to disclose their condition. People remain deeply anxious and sceptical regarding the response of others to this disclosure. Although legislative protection exists this does not appear to ameliorate concerns, with many navigating this challenge based on experiential learning that has influenced their progress in multiple settings (McIntosh 2016; Johnson and Joshi 2016; Hayward, McVilly, and Stokes 2018).

### ***Validity, reliability and ethics***

Full ethical approval for this project was granted by the researcher's HE organisation

The researcher also acknowledges that their own experiences, background and ontological beliefs around autism will directly affect the approach and impact of this project.

In order to maintain validity, all interviews were conducted either face to face or via Skype, allowing the researcher the opportunity to examine body language and general demeanour of participants (Denscombe 2014). Field notes were taken during interviews, and full transcripts were typed up. Following this, copies were sent to each participant before analysis took place to agree that the content was an accurate record of the interview.

## **Results**

The context of this exploration was the researcher's experiences of supporting students with autism in a HE setting; witnessing their challenges and the high attrition rate this group of individuals anecdotally demonstrated on



professional undergraduate degrees. Despite the small number of participants, there was a range of professions represented and from this diversity three key themes emerged: Corporate ableism Versus peer 'openness', The cost of camouflaging and concealment in the work-place and personal tenacity, commitment and courage.

### ***Corporate ableism versus peer 'openness'***

All participants had disclosed their diagnosis before entering the workplace. Two were openly refused placements because they had autism:

*Danii: 'she (Practice Educator) hadn't read my placement profile and then when she found out that I was autistic, asked me to leave the placement and said that she couldn't accommodate an autistic person there'*

*Jay: 'I was ready to go to a school near the university and that school refused to take me on because I identified as having autism.'*

All participants reported that they felt there was a lack of understanding on the part of the wider organisations they worked in about autism. None of the participants described any collaborative working between university and placement providers prior to their WBL. This may suggest a lack of understanding on the part of universities in the specific needs of autistic students in such settings. Participants described being pre-judged with no regard for their own personal presentations of the condition. One participant said: *'I feel that the fact that the first school I was due to work in refused to give me the opportunity despite not even meeting me was a barrier'*. Phrases such as *'it didn't register with him'* and *'wouldn't be able to leave me unsupervised'* reinforced their suspicion that their places of work had a stereotypical view of what it meant to be autistic; and this appears to have been more detrimental than an admission of no knowledge:

*Dom: that is a common misconception in the Police due to the nature of it all what we're dealing with, so we tend to assume quite a lot about people. So people in the workforce were confusing autism with ADHD.*

*Danii: 'Like I would require super...extra supervision, I wouldn't be able to show initiative, her auntie was autistic and she was violent, that sort of thing like'*

This ableist approach by organisations is well documented (Hayward, McVilly, and Stokes 2019), literature reviews highlight a corporate-wide internalisation of the medical model of disability and a complete immersion in 'deficit' (Hansen 2015; Scott et al. 2018). One participant commented: *'I suspect that a lot of places turned me down because I disclosed that I was autistic'*. The work of Hill and Roger (2016) confirms the negative stereotyping of any disability in the workplace. Kattari's (2015) work exposes the multiple

'microaggressions' that individuals face, further compounding misunderstanding and negative identity. What is surprising is that a number of participants were openly refused placements before prospective workplaces had met them or possessed any insight into this individual's strengths or weaknesses. Comments like *'I've found current employers, sometimes they won't understand where I'm coming from or, why I'm asking that question'*, can raise individuals' concerns about lack of understanding. All the participants exposed to this experience explained how organisations navigated this to avoid an allegation of discrimination:

*Cal: I didn't actually go in the end, unfortunately, the station pulled out, because they couldn't fit me in the whole time-frame. But I don't know if also it was because I did disclose that I was also on the autism spectrum*

Despite the establishment of the Equality Act (2010) and the Autism Act (2009), legislative messages of statutory inclusion and the protection of human rights appears to have had little impact on actual day to day experiences for neurodivergent individuals. This theme of a reluctance to evoke statutory support was highlighted in existing literature; Gelbar, Smith, and Reichow (2014) discuss the gap in corporate understanding of disability and inadequate support for individuals. Phrases like *'I don't think they completely understood'* would certainly support the notion that partial understanding can increase challenges and: *'I felt staff should've understood that I needed them to be consistent with what they told me to do.'* Furthermore, the examination of Beardon and Martin's work (Beardon, Martin, and Woolsey 2009), discussed the dilution of the power and effectiveness of reasonable adjustments due to a generic (and inaccurate) corporate interpretation of 'difference'. Contrastingly, the experiences of participant when directly working with co-workers was positive:

*Jay: the staff were generally very supportive at that school*

*Dom: all in all I found that the Police officers and Police staff were quite welcoming and quite inclusive and they looked to understand where I needed the help and where I needed support. They were very open and honest and then they went about doing stuff for me, like even from a social aspect. There was one occasion I struggle in social settings ...more so when we were having our refreshment break: And she said, 'well Dom, we'll invite you on like a few more work social occasions not in work, socialising like' and that helped me massively*

*Izzy: And the relationship with her (Co Worker) was actually very positive, if I explained that I needed a little bit more time for things, she would always say 'you know what, that's fine'*

An openness to the notion of 'difference' amongst co-workers appears highly significant, it provided participants with a sense of support and inclusivity. Key phrases used by participants such as: *'the relationship was positive'*, *'they were open and honest'* *'we'll invite you on a few more social occasions'*, all helped participants to feel included and valued in the workforce. This

was independent of colleagues' expertise of autism; one participant reported: *'my mentor asked me how having autism was helping me with my, career work with kids with special needs'*. This would certainly influence an individual's sense of status in an organisation and demonstrates a real desire on the part of peers to understand individuality. Some mentors took a distinctly nurturing approach: *'anytime they give me feedback they would run it by my college tutor to make sure it wouldn't damage any of my confidence, that it would be ok for me to hear'*. Rashid, Hodgetts, and Nicholas (2017) argues that the most powerful and effective ways to build good employment environments is by investing in skills and awareness of co-workers and colleagues. They argue that the main strategy for building employment capacity is the involvement of co-workers rather than the evoking of protective policy or a corporate philosophy of inclusion. McIntosh (2016) argues that early positive experiences in the workplace are pivotal for individuals' long-term professional identity. (University WBL is a clear example of this exposure). McIntosh also states that positive peer relationships are fundamental in informing this identity. This can be inherently challenging for individuals with ASD but if co-workers are open to the possibility of different value sets and the validity of alternative professional approaches; employers can capitalise on the latent skills that individuals with autism may possess.

Although extensive research exists regarding managerial and organisational responses to autistic employees, little exists discussing the experiences of co-workers; Johnson and Joshi (2016) describe the importance of co-workers' openness to disability as being key in the success of any employment. This assertion would certainly be supported by the experiences of the participants for this study; line-managers have 'satellite' involvement with employees whereas co-workers and peers work daily with individuals and may be far more influential in informing the experiences of the individual with autism.

### ***The cost of camouflaging and concealment in the work-place***

Participants in the study all discussed the 'price' of completing a working day in neuro typical environments. This theme directly corresponds to the work of Evans (2013) and Green (2015) Both authors discuss the reluctance of any student with additional needs to make a disclosure due to the highly negative connotations it carries; interpretations that students find almost impossible to confront. Many described their fear of being 'judged' more harshly because of their condition:

*Dom: you didn't really talk about it because I felt like people were scared of offending or scared of upsetting people or getting into trouble possibly.*

*Danii: And I didn't feel I could say anything because I didn't want to draw attention to my autism because people seemed to think that being autistic was somehow being unprofessional*

*Izzy: So the direct line manager wasn't very positive, I wasn't really welcomed, it was maybe a bit like a pain in the butt?*

*Jay: other teachers in school said that the teacher I was working with was too harsh with me, and marked me too harshly and that I was doing ok and that I shouldn't be putting so much work into it.*

The collective anxiety experienced by participants suggests a deeply held concern that difference is not tolerated. Comments like these: *'because in my head if I had spoken up more about it I probably wouldn't have been allowed to pass a placement but I don't know if that's true'*, would certainly support this assumption. The presence of a disability may directly challenge corporate views of what a capable, and accomplished professional looks like in a work place. 'Jay' went on to say: *'my point that I was trying to make might be mis-interpreted'*. Participants admitted to a real anxiety about being 'discovered' or inadequate due to the presence of a diagnosis, students are not encouraged to be individuals, rather they learn to conform and comply in order to be successful. This appears to manifest as a reluctance to even discuss support; and the evidence would suggest that individuals rarely utilise their rights to reasonable adjustments in the workplace. Phrases like: *'I wasn't expecting to need any accommodation'* and *'autism quite a taboo topic, you didn't really talk about it'* would certainly evidence this.

Sarrett (2017) suggests this should be unsurprising; individuals may have experienced a long and difficult history of disclosure in other environments. Many will have experienced negative repercussions in educational and social situations by declaring their autism; ranging from innocuous misconceptions to victimisation, intimidation and bullying (Wong et al. 2018). Joining the workforce offers an individual reinvention, and the possibility of needing to re-experience past stigma is deeply uninviting.

One participant even explained that offering any challenge to organisational culture or practice could be misinterpreted:

*Danii: So afterwards I was reflecting on the situation in my supervision, and I said not expecting a questionnaire to have you know, questions like that and my practice educator had said 'oh is that because of your autism?'*

Participants went on to discuss the physical and emotional impact of camouflaging their autism through the working day:

*Dom: I hated it. (the physical environment) early shifts for instance was horrible because we used to have, our entire block of officers in and that was just overload. On an early shift I used to drink energy drinks just to keep me awake, keep me alert, it was horrific. Also yellow body armour. That was disorientating me cos I kept on looking up, wherever I saw the yellow body armour it was distracting me*

*Danii: But I think the hardest thing was hot-desking, that exacerbated everything. people touching my stuff, and room not being exactly how I expected it and not knowing where I'm going to sit and there would be times I would get in and, somebody would*

*be sitting at my desk and I'd just go in the toilets and cry because I wouldn't know what to do about it and I'd think I'm gonna get kicked off my placement and somebody's gonna find out this is what I'm upset about.*

*Cal: I'm very good at camouflaging my autism, I can adapt to situations for a short period of time before it tires me out, I learned to cope sometimes in quite difficult situations like on trains and stuff where you might get a bit of aftershave on somebody else and it's very potent aftershave.*

The responses to these questions were particularly powerful; providing a direct testimony to the everyday difficulties of sensory integration, the exhaustion of social interaction and the need to 'conceal' the impact that sensory integration has on working life. The Participants used phrases such as '*camouflaging my autism*' and '*being autistic is seen as unprofessional*' and '*getting different information from different sources was very difficult*', individuals took every step they could to conceal their additional needs. Much research exists which examines the process and application of social camouflaging (Bolton and Happe 2018; Schuck, Flores, and Fung 2019; Cage and Troxell-Whitman 2019; Allely 2019). Interestingly, most of the individuals in this study appeared not to reflect on this; instead it appears to be an unspoken circumstance they have learned to facilitate in order to conform. An examination of the work by Hamilton (2018) and Trede (2012) confirms that the development of professional identity is heavily influenced by a societal construct and utter conformity to existing status quos; a definitive theme identified also by this research.

Sensory integration issues are well documented (Iarocci and McDonald 2006; Robertson and Baron-Cohen 2017) and a key characteristic of autism (National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE) 2011). However, despite this awareness, autistic individuals appear to pay a high price for participation in neurotypical environments. Descriptions such as: '*I'd go in the toilets and cover my eyes...take paracetamol*' and '*What is hard is being overloaded, that's the worst thing...*' Their descriptions are extreme and it is a matter for concern and consideration how this will ultimately affect individuals' health and wellbeing.

Krieger et al. (2012) explore this issue further by referring to our participation in a meaningful work life as one of the fundamental wider determinants of health. They particularly examine what prevents individuals with Asperger's syndrome enjoying meaningful employment; social interaction and environmental factors are highlighted as direct barriers to continued employment. Access to suitable working environments whereby individuals feel supported, safe and able to contribute is a matter of health equality (Marmot, Allen, and Goldblatt 2013), this has indeed been a government target embedded in public health policy for a number of years (Department of Health (DOH) 2010). However, this appears to have had little impact on the working lives of those with autism as little regard or accommodation is

given to the challenges they may face working in sensory-laden, complex social environments.

Little research exists that examines the long-term implications of working under such stressful conditions. One participant did offer an example and some insight into what the consequences might be:

*Danii it's linked to sort of ongoing problems with my, with my neck I was battling the lights I would like tense.*

The repression of 'self' appears to be a recurring theme for participants; in order to acquire professional identity, difference and disability needs to be masked at all costs (Brownlow, Werth, and Keefe 2018). The culturally enlightened narratives of inclusion, acceptance and openness appear to have done little to reassure individuals with autism that they will be accepted, respected and cared for in working environments.

### ***Personal tenacity, commitment and courage***

The remit of this research was not to examine individuals' personalities or educational journeys. However, an emerging theme from participants was that of similar personal attributes. Most HE students are likely to experience anxiety and self-doubt before undertaking university study (He et al. 2018), this may be more acute for an undergraduate beginning a professional degree (Bogowicz et al. 2018). It is not difficult to imagine that it would be more of a challenge to an autistic individual. The work of Andrea MacLeod et al. (2018) describes the challenges that autistic individuals have in undertaking degree level study. She argues that successful students offer counter narratives to the usual deficit-based interpretation of autism and should be viewed as 'pioneers of disability awareness'. Each of the participants in this research had the courage to be ultra-visible with their disability and took personal responsibility to navigate complex and unfathomable professional landscapes:

*Danii: So there was a couple of things at the beginning where some kind of comments were made but I think the difference was that I called those comments out straight away and people was sort of more, apologetic.*

*Izzy: Erm...I think one of the really good things is I will to understand people, sometimes it's said that people with autism don't have empathy,; And I don't agree with that at all, I have a lot of empathy... the, Aspergers that I have too; actually gave me more credibility and a better understanding of problems.*

*Jay: 'they gave me very different, quite ambiguous instructions and ambiguous feedback, which I found very difficult, and I failed that placement and I feel it was partly down to that ambiguous feedback by telling me to do one thing and then asking me to do another thing . I've always enjoyed working with kids on placements and I've always been told that's my strongest area, staff have said to me that I'm good at working*

*with kids. The third school I was at said I was really good at working with adults with special needs.*

*Dom: I was quite open with my autism in generally I think they were very abrasive to an extent with me. Because what scared me was the misconceptions in people's minds. It took a long time to try and make them to feel comfortable to talk about autism. Also to talk about how autism impacted on me and also I think just come to terms with the difference, getting away from their assumption, challenging them. That was one of the barriers, but I liked it, to battle through: It's because I want it more.*

All the participants in the study had resisted the limitations of their diagnosis, choosing to follow a career path that was challenging and deeply rooted in neurotypical paradigms. Participants made comments such as: *'I'm a perfectionist, I want to make sure it's perfect and right'* and *'I liked it, to battle through'* demonstrating a real commitment to a high standard of work and a sense of tenacity that would be welcome in any work force. Recurring themes of being *'discovered'* or *'judged'* or the simple presence of a diagnosis participants found unnerving but chose to continue: *'Do what feels right, what you're passionate about'* and *'I was told that I did have the potential to be a good teacher but the school felt that I wasn't ready yet for that kind of responsibility and that's why they failed me, but I want to keep going.'* They have not chosen an obvious path or ones that are considered typically aligned with the common perceptions of autism traits (Richards 2012); rather they resisted stereotyping and prepared to do battle in environments and cultures that are wholly under-equipped to enhance and potentialise their talents.

Despite this they have all succeeded; (all participants went on to successfully complete their studies) and resisted the barriers and misconceptions surrounding their conditions to pursue the lives they wanted in careers that are meaningful: *'I think empathy and attention to detail and enjoying the structured work worked in my favour.'* Work based learning experiences occasionally helped with this, but were often a hindrance, with poor corporate understanding and a lack of creative and responsive support for individuals. The work of Madriaga and Goodley (2010), supported this theme of inadequate preparation of HEs for both progression through university and WBL experiences. The identification of an inadequate pedagogy and gaps in support merely compound unpreparedness.

Success was down to individual tenacity, a willingness to work against latent barriers and utter resistance to stereotypical notions of who they were. Participants made comments such as: *'I sort of reflect and work in the way that I now would have come up in my working life (.) it's, it's nice to be able to share that and to hopefully help other people'* and *'I've always enjoyed working with kids on placements ...and I've always been told that's my strongest area. a lot of schools I've worked in have said that I need to work on my organisational skills erm...and my ability to plan lessons, so that's what I'll keep doing.'*



## Discussion

The aim of this research was to gain insight rather than answers to the challenges faced by autistic individuals in work-based settings. It was a privilege to share those stories that were both inspiring and troubling in equal measure.

The finding of this project suggests that despite more 'awareness' of the condition of autism, stereotypical and detrimental beliefs still exist. Ableism is both blatant and latent, with highly misinformed notions of disability; neurodivergent individuals have no confidence that their needs and persona will be understood. Success for all of the participants was due in part to their utter conformity to neurotypical conceptions of professionalism, their immense effort to resist socially constructed discourses about disability and their determination to succeed in public-facing, highly complex careers. All of the participants had chosen career paths which challenged the interpretation of autistic capability and 'pioneered' the frontiers of work-based learning. What is clear is that there is no lack of ability or challenge in skill acquisition for these students; they have arrived on a professional degree course after working through adversity and challenge beyond the experience of most other undergraduates (Ward and Webster 2018). They have had the courage to pursue a tough and demanding career against a continuing landscape of challenge and discrimination. Universities are doing little to ameliorate this; instead of celebrating the immense and latent employability of this group, organisations continue to remain ignorant of the subtle and nuanced presentations of autism.

All the participants were pursuing careers in well-established public organisations and indeed successfully met the required standard for qualification in their chosen areas. These places of work deal with all aspects of society, often in the most extreme and challenging of circumstances. If workforces are to be truly responsive to the needs of the population they serve, the employees of such places need to reflect that diversity (Shaban 2016). Yet those very institutions display an alarming inflexibility and inherent misunderstanding of the needs of people with difference. The aim of the research was that of an emancipatory approach, to listen carefully to what individuals who had the 'lived experience' of WBL had to say.

Although limited in size, this project did offer areas of recommendations:

***Organisations possess a poor understanding of the support needs for students and do not adequately prepare either students or placement for their arrival***

HEs appear to possess a poor understanding of the needs of students identified as autistic. Organisations will readily recruit without a clear understanding of the support required for individuals to succeed and thrive in



university. Furthermore, HEs do not adequately prepare placement partners to appropriately support autistic students. Universities recruit students on to professional degree courses but preparation of partner agencies is poorly considered. There appeared to be no systematic approach to how universities work with partner organisations in readiness to ensure that students learning and experience is supported. Interestingly skill acquisition was not an issue for any of the participants, or raised as a concern by any WBL organisation. However, none of the participants in this research were invited to collaborate in their own preparation for placement, identify their own strengths or discuss where additional support may be needed. There appears to be no regard for the unique presentation autism may have with each individual; and what was to particularly problematic was an organisational notion of 'ASD awareness'. Partial awareness of autism within organisations was detrimental for a number of students; they were clearly misunderstood whereas co-workers who may have had no 'knowledge' of ASD were open and willing to learn from the students themselves regarding the impact of the condition.

- At the 'recruitment' stage of a university career the demands of a professional degree should be absolutely explicit; with a transparent and realistic policy of support.
- If organisational support cannot commit to meet the needs of an individual with autism on a professional course, no offer should be made.
- It is morally wrong for any institution to make unrealistic claims, financially compromise a student, then allow them to fail due to an underestimation of support requirements.
- Individuals identified as autistic need to lead on planning their own support in placement. Guarantees of an open conversation between the student and placement needs to take place before the commencement of WBL.
- Universities are fundamental in the facilitation of this as they have responsibility for placement quality and the learning experience of the student.
- Formal training on autism by appropriate experts should be statutory for any organisation claiming to hold an inclusive employment philosophy.

### ***The suppression of 'self' and social camouflaging in professional environments***

Students had resorted to extreme measures to 'camouflage' their true personae in WBL environments for fear of being judged. The descriptions of physical and emotional pressures experienced by participants was concerning; with all participants describing the daily challenges they faced and

the expectation of utter conformity in order to be successful in placement settings. The personal tenacity and commitment demonstrated by each participant was revealing; despite the environments they found themselves in, each one worked against the multiple micro barriers to successfully accomplish their goals.

- It is the job of universities to challenge and open the doors to opportunity for all aspects of society. They need to lead the way on setting the cultural agenda of capability, employability and championing those from a diverse background; HEs
- need to lead on changing the discourse of professional identity.
- The occupational health and wellbeing of students in this nuanced context needs to be rigorously safeguarded, measures need to be taken to ensure that working environments are conducive to learning, and not detrimental to wellbeing.
- There is little evidence that skill acquisition is an issue, it is the wider concepts of professionalism and working environments that derail students' progress; universities need to directly challenge this notion and promote the abilities and strengths of neurodiversity.

### ***Championing neurodiversity, combating ableism, and the facilitation of employment***

Despite the existence of protective legislation (Fredman 2017), students have no confidence that organisations would respect their differences; furthermore, none of the participants in this research had any control over the disclosure of their own diagnosis. They were left in the vulnerable position of being pre-judged by staff and having no power over how this information was interpreted by organisations. Furthermore, there appeared to be no direct confrontation of those organisations which discriminated against individuals identified as autistic. There is no group of individuals better placed to change that paradigm, individuals who have always found themselves marginalised, always need to explain themselves and have worked exhaustively to 'fit in'. What better asset could any university have than a group of students who will display an immense work ethic, will push against boundaries that have sought to define them, and have the courage to stand up and make a professional difference to other people's lives.

- Choosing not to 'disclose' a diagnosis is not a sign of moral weakness in an individual; the 'ownership' of an individual's diagnosis is theirs and theirs alone. Therefore, an insistence on disclosure from any organisation is not appropriate and contributes greatly to the strengthening of the medical model of disability.

- The management of the 'disclosure' process needs unequivocal clarity and respect for the confidential nature of this information. Ambiguous management of this process may lead to students not realising that they have consented to the 'sharing' of a diagnosis with partner organisations
- It is the moral obligation of a HE institution to tackle directly any discrimination, ableism or latent attempts to exclude students from partnership workers due to the existence of neurodivergence
- Any partner organisation which actively discriminates against a student with difference (either directly or indirectly) needs robustly challenging; ableism should never be ignored or side stepped.

Also, to the wonderful and inspiring participants. It was a pleasure to meet you, thank you for sharing your stories.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr Luke Beardon, Dr Jill Pluqualec and Dr Stephen Connolly at Sheffield Hallam University for their ongoing support, encouragement and wisdom.

## Disclosure statement

I wish to confirm that there are no known conflicts of interest associated with this research and there has been no financial support for this work that could have influenced its outcome.

## References

- Aina, C., E. Baici, G. Casalone, and F. Pastore. 2018. The Economics of University Dropouts and Delayed Graduation: A Survey. *papers.ssrn.com*
- Allely, C. S. 2019. "Understanding and Recognising the Female Phenotype of Autism Spectrum Disorder and the "Camouflage" Hypothesis: A Systematic PRISMA Review." *Advances in Autism* 5 (1): 14–37. doi:10.1108/AIA-09-2018-0036.
- Beardon, L., N. Martin, and I. Woolsey. 2009. "What Do Students with Asperger Syndrome or Highfunctioning Autism Want at College and University?(in Their Own Words)." *Good Autism Practice (GAP)* 10 (2): 35–43.
- Bogowicz, P., J. Ferguson, E. Gilvarry, F. Kamali, E. Kaner, and D. Newbury-Birch. 2018. "Alcohol and Other Substance Use among Medical and Law Students at a UK University: A Cross-Sectional Questionnaire Survey." *Postgraduate Medical Journal* 94 (1109): 131–136. doi:10.1136/postgradmedj-2017-135136.
- Bolton, P., and F. Happé. 2018. Good Social Skills Despite Poor Theory of Mind: Exploring Compensation in Autism Spectrum Disorder.
- Brownlow, C., S. Werth, and K. Keefe. 2018. "Autism Spectrum Disorder: Emotion Work in the Workplace." In *Work and Identity*, 23–37. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.
- Cage, E., and Z. Troxell-Whitman. 2019. "Understanding the Reasons, Contexts and Costs of Camouflaging for Autistic Adults." *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 49 (5): 1899–1911. doi:10.1007/s10803-018-03878-x.

- Cherastidtham, I., A. Norton, and W. Mackey. 2018. *University Attrition: What Helps and What Hinders University Completion*. Grattan InstitutAustralia apo.org.au
- Chown, N., J. Baker-Rogers, L. Hughes, K. N. Cossburn, and P. Byrne. 2018. "The 'High Achievers' Project: An Assessment of the Support for Students with Autism Attending UK Universities." *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 42 (6): 837–854. doi:10.1080/0309877X.2017.1323191.
- Chown, Nick, Jackie Robinson, Luke Beardon, Jillian Downing, Liz Hughes, Julia Leatherland, Katrina Fox, Laura Hickman, and Duncan MacGregor. 2017. "Improving Research about us, with us: A Draft Framework for Inclusive Autism Research." *Disability & Society* 32 (5): 720–734. doi:10.1080/09687599.2017.1320273.
- Creswell, J. W., and C. N. Poth. 2017. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*. Sage Publications. Los Angeles/London/New Delhi/Singapore/Washington DC
- Cridland, E. K., S. C. Jones, P. Caputi, and C. A. Magee. 2015. "Qualitative Research with Families Living with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Recommendations for Conducting Semistructured Interviews." *Journal of Intellectual and Developmental Disability* 40 (1): 78–91. doi:10.3109/13668250.2014.964191.
- Crosling, G. 2017. "Student Retention in Higher Education, a Shared Issue." *Encyclopedia of International Higher Education Systems and Institutions* 1–6.
- Davies, B., and P. Bansel. 2007. "Neoliberalism and Education." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 20 (3): 247–259. doi:10.1080/09518390701281751.
- Dearing, R. 1997. *Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education: Dearing Report (House of Lords Papers)*.
- Dempsey, L., M. Dowling, P. Larkin, and K. Murphy. 2016. "Sensitive Interviewing in Qualitative Research." *Research in Nursing & Health* 39 (6): 480–490. doi:10.1002/nur.21743.
- Denscombe, M. 2014. *Page 99 the Good Research Guide: For Small-Scale Social Research Projects*. London: McGraw-Hill Education (UK).
- Denzin, N. K., and Y. S. Lincoln. eds. 2011. *Chapter 6 the Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*. SageLos Angeles/London/New Delhi/Singapore/Washington: DC.
- Department of Health (DOH). 2010. *Healthy Lives, Healthy People: Our Strategy for Public Health in England* (Vol. 7985). The Stationery Office. London, England: UK.
- Douglas, J. A., A. Douglas, R. J. McClelland, and J. Davies. 2015. "Understanding Student Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction: An Interpretive Study in the UK Higher Education Context." *Studies in Higher Education* 40 (2): 329–349. doi:10.1080/03075079.2013.842217. Routledge, UK.
- Dupéré, V., M. Goulet, I. Archambault, E. Dion, T. Leventhal, and R. Crosnoe. 2019. "Circumstances Preceding Dropout among Rural High School Students: A Comparison with Urban Peers." *Journal of Research in Rural Education* 35 (3): 1–20.
- Equality and Human Rights Commission. 2010. "What Equality Law Means for You as a Student in Further or Higher Education." [http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/what\\_equality\\_law\\_means\\_for\\_you\\_as\\_a\\_student\\_in\\_further\\_or\\_higher\\_education.pdf](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/what_equality_law_means_for_you_as_a_student_in_further_or_higher_education.pdf)
- Evans, W. 2013. "I Am Not a Dyslexic Person, I'm a Person with Dyslexia: Identity Constructions of Dyslexia among Students in nurse education." <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jan.12199/full>
- Fredman, S. 2017. "Disability Equality: A Challenge to the Existing anti-Discrimination Paradigm?" In *Disability and Equality Law*, 123–142. Jul 5 1st edition Routledge.
- Gelbar, N. W., I. Smith, and B. Reichow. 2014. "Systematic Review of Articles Describing Experience and Supports of Individuals with Autism Enrolled in College and University

- Programs." *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 44 (10): 2593–2601. doi:10.1007/s10803-014-2135-5.
- Green, A. 2015. "Keeping Secrets: A Case Study of Students' Disclosure of Dyslexia and Dyspraxia on Application for a Work Placement." *The Journal of Inclusive Practice in Further and Higher Education* 6: 4–21.
- Hamilton, R. 2018. "Work-Based Learning in Social Work Education: The Challenges and Opportunities for the Identities of Work-Based Learners on University-Based Programs." *Social Work Education* 1 38(6) 766–778.
- Hansen, R. S. 2015. Understanding Employment Preparedness Needs for College Students with Asperger's Disorder.
- Hayward, S. M., K. R. McVilly, and M. A. Stokes. 2018. "Challenges for Females with High Functioning Autism in the Workplace: A Systematic Review." *Disability and Rehabilitation* 40 (3): 249–258.
- Hayward, S. M., K. R. McVilly, and M. A. Stokes. 2019. "Autism and Employment: What Works." *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders* 60: 48–58. doi:10.1016/j.rasd.2019.01.006.
- He, F. X., B. Turnbull, M. N. Kirshbaum, B. Phillips, and P. Klainin-Yobas. 2018. "Assessing Stress, Protective Factors and Psychological Well-Being among Undergraduate Nursing Students." *Nurse Education Today* 68: 4–12.
- Hill, S., and A. Roger. 2016. "The Experience of Disabled and Non-Disabled Students on Professional Practice Placements in the United Kingdom." *Disability & Society* 31 (9): 1205–1225. doi:10.1080/09687599.2016.1236718.
- Hoeve, Y. T., G. Jansen, and P. Roodbol. 2014. "The Nursing Profession: Public Image, Self-Concept and Professional Identity. A Discussion Paper." *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 70 (2): 295–309.
- Hurley-Hanson, A. E., C. M. Giannantonio, and A. J. Griffiths. 2020. "The Career Experiences of Individuals with ASD." In *Autism in the Workplace*, 67–84. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.
- Hurt, L., K. Langley, K. North, A. Southern, L. Copeland, J. Gillard, and S. Williams. 2019. "Understanding and Improving the Care Pathway for Children with Autism." *International Journal of Health Care Quality Assurance* 32 (1): 208–223.
- Iarocci, G., and J. McDonald. 2006. "Sensory Integration and the Perceptual Experience of Persons with Autism." *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 36 (1): 77–90.
- Johnson, T. D., and A. Joshi. 2016. "Dark Clouds or Silver Linings? A Stigma Threat Perspective on the Implications of an Autism Diagnosis for Workplace Well-Being." *Journal of Applied Psychology* 101 (3): 430–449. doi:10.1037/apl0000058.
- Jones, L., L. Goddard, E. L. Hill, L. A. Henry, and L. Crane. 2014. "Experiences of Receiving a Diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Survey of Adults in the United Kingdom." *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 44 (12): 3033–3044.
- Kattari, S. K. 2015. "Examining Ableism in Higher Education through Social Dominance Theory and Social Learning Theory." *Innovative Higher Education* 40 (5): 375–386. doi:10.1007/s10755-015-9320-0.
- Krieger, B., A. Kinebanian, B. Prodingler, and F. Heigl. 2012. "Becoming a Member of the Work Force: Perceptions of Adults with Asperger Syndrome." *Work (Reading, Mass.)* 43 (2): 141–157. doi:10.3233/WOR-2012-1392.
- MacLeod, A., J. Allan, A. Lewis, and C. Robertson. 2018. "Here I Come Again': The Cost of Success for Higher Education Students Diagnosed with Autism." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 22 (6): 683–697. doi:10.1080/13603116.2017.1396502.
- Madriaga, M., and D. Goodley. 2010. "Moving beyond the Minimum: Socially Just Pedagogies and Asperger's Syndrome in UK Higher Education." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 14 (2): 115–131. doi:10.1080/13603110802504168.

- Marmot, M., J. Allen, and P. Goldblatt. 2013. "Fair Society, Healthy Lives." *Inequalities in Health: Concepts, Measures, and Ethics*, 282. Marmot M 'Fair society Healthy lives ' UK Parliament.
- McIntosh, C. K. 2016. "Asperger's Syndrome and the Development of a Positive Work Identity." *Journal of Business and Management* 22 (1): 87–101.
- Milton, D., and M. Bracher. 2013. "Autistics Speak but Are They Heard?" *Medical Sociology Online* 7 (2): 61–69.
- Moser, A., and I. Korstjens. 2018. "Series: Practical Guidance to Qualitative Research. Part 3: Sampling, Data Collection and Analysis." *European Journal of General Practice* 24 (1): 9–18. doi:10.1080/13814788.2017.1375091.
- Moustakas, C. 1994. *Phenomenological Research Methods*. Sage. Los Angeles/London/New Delhi/Singapore/Washington: DC.
- National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE). 2011. "Autism Spectrum Disorders in Under 19's: Recognition, Referral and Diagnosis." <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg128>
- National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE). 2019. "Autism Spectrum Disorder in Adults: Diagnosis and Management." <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/CG142/chapter/1-Guidance#identification-and-assessment-2>
- Ohl, A., M. Grice Sheff, S. Small, J. Nguyen, K. Paskor, and A. Zanjirian. 2017. "Predictors of Employment Status among Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder." *Work (Reading, Mass.)* 56 (2): 345–355.
- Petrova, E., J. Dewing, and M. Camilleri. 2016. "Confidentiality in Participatory Research: Challenges from One Study." *Nursing Ethics* 23 (4): 442–454.
- Pfeiffer, B., W. Coster, G. Snethen, M. Derstine, A. Piller, and C. Tucker. 2017. "Caregivers' Perspectives on the Sensory Environment and Participation in Daily Activities of Children With Autism Spectrum Disorder." *The American Journal of Occupational Therapy : official Publication of the American Occupational Therapy Association* 71 (4): 7104220020p1–7104220028p9. doi:10.5014/ajot.2017.021360.
- Pietkiewicz, I., and J. A. Smith. 2014. "A Practical Guide to Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in Qualitative Research Psychology." *Psychological Journal* 20 (1): 7–14.
- Polkinghorne, D. E. 1989. "Phenomenological Research Methods." In *Existential-Phenomenological Perspectives in Psychology*, 41–60. Springer, Boston, MA.
- Rashid, M., S. Hodgetts, and D. Nicholas. 2017. "Building Employers' Capacity to Support Vocational Opportunities for Adults with Developmental Disabilities." *Review Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 4 (2): 165–173. doi:10.1007/s40489-017-0105-5.
- Richards, J. 2012. "Examining the Exclusion of Employees with Asperger Syndrome from the Workplace." *Personnel Review* 41 (5): 630–646. doi:10.1108/00483481211249148.
- Robertson, C. E., and S. Baron-Cohen. 2017. "Sensory Perception in Autism." *Nature Reviews. Neuroscience* 18 (11): 671–684.
- Sansosti, F. J., K. B. Lavik, and J. M. Sansosti. 2012. "Family Experiences through the Autism Diagnostic Process." *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities* 27 (2): 81–92. doi:10.1177/1088357612446860.
- Sarrett, J. 2017. "Interviews, Disclosures, and Misperceptions: Autistic Adults' Perspectives on Employment Related Challenges." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 37 (2). doi:10.18061/dsq.v37i2.5524.
- Schuck, R. K., R. E. Flores, and L. K. Fung. 2019. "Brief Report: Sex/Gender Differences in Symptomology and Camouflaging in Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder." *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 49 (6): 2597–2604.
- Scott, M., M. Falkmer, T. Falkmer, and S. Girdler. 2018. "Evaluating the Effectiveness of an Autism-Specific Workplace Tool for Employers: A Randomised Controlled Trial." *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 48 (10): 3377–3392.

- Shaban, A. 2016. "Managing and Leading a Diverse Workforce: One of the Main Challenges in Management." *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences* 230: 76–84. doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2016.09.010.
- Smith, J. A. 1996. "Beyond the Divide between Cognition and Discourse: Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in Health Psychology." *Psychology & Health* 11 (2): 261–271. doi:10.1080/08870449608400256.
- Smith, J. A., P. Flowers, and M. Larkin. 2009. *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research*. Sage. Los Angeles/London/New Delhi/Singapore/Washington: DC.
- Stone, C. 2017. "Opportunity Through Online Learning: Improving Student Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education."
- Taylor, J. 2011. "The Intimate Insider: Negotiating the Ethics of Friendship When Doing Insider Research." *Qualitative Research* 11 (1): 3–22. doi:10.1177/1468794110384447.
- Thiel, A., J. John, and A. Frahsa. 2019. "Qualitative Interviews in Sport and Physical Activity Research—Do Not Forget the Body." *European Journal for Sport and Society* 16 (1): 1–4. doi:10.1080/16138171.2019.1616423.
- Thomas, L. 2016. "Developing Inclusive Learning to Improve the Engagement, Belonging, Retention, and Success of Students from Diverse Groups." In *Widening Higher Education Participation*, 135–159. Chandos Publishing. Cambridge: UK.
- Trede, F. 2012. "Role of Work-Integrated Learning in Developing Professionalism and Professional Identity." *Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education* 13 (3): 159–167.
- UCAS. 2018a. <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/record-percentage-young-people-are-university>
- UCAS. 2018b. <https://www.ucas.com/undergraduate/applying-university/individual-needs/disabled-students>
- Van Manen, M. 2001. *Page 177 Researching Lived Experience: human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*. London, Ontario, The Althouse Press.
- Vincent, J. 2020. "Employability for UK University Students and Graduates on the Autism Spectrum: Mobilities and Materialities." *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* 22 (1): 12–24. doi:10.16993/sjdr.656.
- Ward, D., and A. Webster. 2018. "Understanding the Lived Experiences of University Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): A Phenomenological Study." *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education* 65 (4): 373–392. doi:10.1080/1034912X.2017.1403573.
- Wong, P. S., M. Donnelly, P. A. Neck, and B. Boyd. 2018. "Positive Autism: Investigation of Workplace Characteristics Leading to a Strengths-Based Approach to Employment of People with Autism." *Review of International Comparative Management* 19 (1): 15–30. doi:10.24818/RMCI.2018.1.15.