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Autism and its Effects on Students

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Shane Fitzsimmons

Autism and its Effects on Students

Autism: Its Causes, and its Characteristics.

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and autism both describe disorders that are characterized, in various degrees, by difficulties in socialization, communication, and repetitive behaviors. As of May 2013 with the publication of the DSM-5 diagnostic manual, all autism disorders, including high functioning autism and Asperger's Syndrome, were merged into one diagnosis of ASD ("Autism Spectrum Disorder" Handout). People diagnosed with autism tend to have strong non-verbal abilities but have trouble with verbal tasks, identifying other people's feelings, and looking at other's faces (Volkmar "Autism"). Difficulties in motor coordination and attention as well as physical health issues such as sleep and gastrointestinal problems can also occur ("Autism Spectrum Disorder" Handout). Often, there are hypersensitivities to vision, light, patterns, colors, sound, balance, taste, and smell (Horwood 39-42, 45, 47, 53-55). Accepting signs of affection and making eye contact with others can make a person with autism uncomfortable (Horwood 57-59). Scientists believe that people with autism are more likely to suffer from autoimmune diseases such as arthritis and allergies (Edwards 32).

People with autism often do not know that other people have feelings and beliefs since they have difficulty understanding anything that they do not experience. Individuals with autism have a better understanding of what they touch, taste, smell, and see than what they hear (Edwards 35). Some of these people, though, excel in visual skills, music, math, and art ("Autism Spectrum Disorder" Handout). People with autism have excellent attention to detail, drive to create rule-based systems and can understand them as well as factual systems (Lai "Autism"). On average, people with autism have better pitch perception, notice details in patterns

better, are less likely to be fooled by optical illusions, solve puzzles very quickly, and are less likely to have false memories than those without autism (Cowen "Autism as Academic Paradigm"). Dr James Cusack argues that there is a generalization that people with autism are not skilled at interpreting gestures and they exaggerate their body language ("Major Study"). Contrary to what studies have shown, people with autism can differentiate between two similar looking things such as fighting and dancing, but difficulties exist when it comes to thinking about how to respond to certain actions (Cusack "Major Study"). Difficulty in grasping the sense of time indicators is often present (Clements 16). Sometimes, people with autism believe that disruptive behavior is the only way to communicate their needs, especially if they do not have good communication skills (Clements 39).

While autism is not a physical disability, there are numerous characteristics that set people with autism apart from others. People with autism may exhibit awkward eye contact or postures, difficulty with changes, sensory sensitivity, delayed responses, may misunderstand tone of voice, have oddities in vocal pitch, may be distracted, have strong, narrow interests, come across as rude, display literal thinking patterns, calm down by rocking or tapping, and may become easily overwhelmed. These people have above average intellect, passionate commitment to ideas, a strong sense of equality and justice, exceptional talents, diligence with routine work, strong pursuit of knowledge, are good visual learners, and come up with original ways of solving problems. However, there might be struggles with initiating effort and tasks, setting boundaries, working in groups, seeing others points of views, understanding social roles, assessing priorities, asking for clarification, interpreting vague instructions, and abstract concepts (Ackles "Autism Spectrum Disorders Fact Sheet").

The current rate of autism is one in sixty-eight, affecting four to five times more males than females, and autism affects over three million individuals in the United States. About forty percent of people with autism have average to above average intelligence while about twenty-five percent are nonverbal and learn to communicate in other ways (“Autism Spectrum Disorder” Handout). About twenty-five percent of people with autism have seizures (Volkmar “Autism”). A study showed that the mortality rate for people with autism is two to eight times higher than the general population mostly due to co-occurring medical conditions. There are no drugs that can reliably improve social communication (Lai “Autism”).

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), the exact cause of autism is unknown, but both genes and the environment play important roles. It notes that in identical twins, if one twin has autism, then in nine out of ten cases, the other twin has autism. Also, future siblings of people with autism have a greater chance of becoming born with traits of autism. NIHM further notes that most people with autism have no family history of autism and no study has linked autism and vaccines since 2010 (“Autism Spectrum Disorder”).

College and its Effects on Students with Autism.

Less than half of people with autism after secondary education participate in either paid work or education within two years (Lai “Autism”). There is a popular belief that individuals with autism are more likely to gravitate toward science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields. Findings suggest that students with autism have the highest STEM participation rate, but the third lowest college enrollment rate among eleven disability categories such as cognitive and physical as well as students in the general population (Wei “Science”). People with high-functioning autism are often verbally skilled and have specific intellectual strengths compared with their peers. High functioning autism tends to persist into adulthood.

Many students with high-functioning autism aspire for a higher education, but there are some students who either do not go to college or drop out due to social isolation, difficulty in changing schedules, problems with living independently, and a lack of external monitoring such as parental supervision. Poor organization and planning skills also contribute to the difficulties with college. These students are at an increased risk for problems with aggression, academic failure, anxiety, or mood problems. Studies show that lower levels of cognitive and social impairment can lead to more depressive symptoms. Social anxiety disorder can also occur, which is characterized by avoiding interpersonal situations, fear of negative evaluation, and poor social interaction skills (White “College Students”).

Managing time to meet the requirements of classes, knowing how to listen to lectures and read textbooks, writing essays and research papers, participating in class discussions and taking exams are all skills that most college-bound students have mastered by the end of high school, but usually at a higher proficiency than students with autism (Edwards 62). Many times, students with autism either become bored at the low level of teaching or frustrated by a lack of ability to cope with more abstract components of a course (Howlin 209). Howlin also notes that students with autism will sometimes disrupt class to change mistakes, which can lead to rejection by others (216). Howlin also found that college personnel will sometimes tell parents that students should be taking care of issues by themselves whenever the parents contact college officials about issues their children are having, which could lead to anxiety for the students (220). Parents of people with autism have increased rates of stress and mental health problems (Levy “Autism”). It should be noted that when someone with autism turns twenty-two, public schools, including colleges, no longer have responsibility for providing services such as extra time on

tests or social counseling that would assist students with autism (“Autism Spectrum Disorder” Handout).

Autism is often described as a disease or a series of impairments, but Tyler Cowen suggests autism is often a competitive advantage at American colleges. Contrary to Howlin, Cowen notes that American colleges are good for people with autism as they mobilize the strengths of people with autism effectively (“Autism as Academic Paradigm”). By law, public schools must allow people with disabilities to have the same access to educational programs as people without disabilities whether that would be through services such as extra classes or summer orientation sessions (Edwards 62). According to Cowen, these individuals also have strong abilities to memorize, perform operations with codes and calculations in their head, and have talent for assembling and ordering information. Cowen notes that people with autism, given the appropriate materials and opportunities, live the ideal of self-education (“Autism as Academic Paradigm”). Many people with autism prefer stable environments, the ability to choose their own hours and work on focused projects for a long time. People diagnosed with autism are often those who encounter major problems in life. Some people with higher-functioning autism do not accept the diagnosis and have no great need for it, plus they fear the stigma of a diagnosis.

Some stereotypes of people with autism include a lack of care for other people and emotions or empathy. These stereotypes are most likely caused by a lack of understanding between people with autism and people without autism (Cowen “Autism as Academic Paradigm”). Even so, students who have a direct family member with autism were much more open to having friends and colleagues with autism (Tipton “Brief Report”).

Examples of Other People with Autism.

TED and YouTube, which are both websites with videos on various topics, have multiple videos about people with autism. The following stories summarize three such examples.

Rosie King has autism and talked about how people are afraid of variety concerning anything. There are thousands of secret worlds inside her head all at the same time. People tend to diagnose autism with specific checkbox descriptions. Her younger brother and sister who are autistic are non-verbal and she really loves them. There is a belief that people with autism only like math and science. She knows of autistic people who are creative. People are so afraid of variety that they try to put everything in a tiny box with specific labels and try to force everyone to be normal. She has a vivid imagination. The world in her head feels much more real to her than the real world. People with autism find what they want to do, find a way to do it, and get on with it. When her imagination kicks in, she cannot stop it, and she has to explain to her teachers a lot about how dull the lectures are. Since she has autism and has sometimes screamed in the middle of lectures in the past, she noticed that some people did not want to be friends with her. She does not want to trade her autism for anything (King “How Autism Freed Me”).

Faith Jegede has two brothers with autism and talked about growing up with them and how people should live a life that is beyond normal. She did not want to be called normal. Remmy is 22, tall, and very handsome. He is speechless but communicates joy in a way that some of the best orators cannot. He knows what love is and shares it unconditionally. He is not greedy and does not see skin color. He also does not care about religious differences. He has never told a lie. He sings songs from childhood, singing the lyrics she cannot remember. Samuel is 16, tall, and very handsome. He has the best memory, but is selective about his memories. He does not remember if he stole her chocolate bar, but remembers the year he saw her iPod and conversations he had when he was four. Around the world, someone with autism is diagnosed

every twenty minutes. Remmy's differences became more noticeable as he grew older. He is without prejudice. Normality overlooks the differences. No one is wrong and instead, there are different kinds of rights (Jegade "What I've Learned").

Joey Travolta has autism and produced the film. His film was about autism and was made for parents with children with autism. He has trouble with processing and conveying information. He also has decreased muscle tone and flop his arms sometimes. His mother has been frustrated with him, but has helped him tremendously. In an interview with several people with autism, Joey discovered that some people like having autism while others did not like autism and/or certain aspects of themselves. The world is not as forgiving when people are older. His younger brother, Jace, believed that Joey did not care much about him, but at times, the relationship felt special. A college girl mentioned that she was good at creative tasks, but not with research papers, and was terrified of the real world. Some people thought that "normal" people scared them and the normal people were either ignorant or spoke too fast to people with autism (Geiszler "Normal").

Results of Survey.

For the thesis, a survey of students with autism was conducted to determine how well Western Michigan University assists these students in multiple areas of college life. The thesis chair and assistant director of Disability Services for Students, Dorothy Fancher, used Simplicity Accommodate to send an invitation for the survey to 24 students with autism. While only two students completed the survey, the results will give us some insight into their college experiences.

Both students are males and the results for the other questions are summarized in the table below (Appendix 1).

Table 1: Results of the survey where X's stand for response

Question	Student 1 Yes	Student 1 No	Student 2 Yes	Student 2 No
2		X	X	
3	X		X	
4	X		X	
5	X		X	
6	X		X	
7	X		X	
8	X			X
9	X		X	
10	X		X	
11		X		X
12		X		X
13	X			X
14	X			X
15	X			X
16	X		X	
17		X	X	
18	X		X	
19	X		X	
20	X		X	
21	X			X
22	X			X

23	X		X	
24		X	X	
25		X	X	

These students both like WMU and have been able to stick to a major and like it (Appendix 3, 6, 7). They both show that they are timely and accurate with their homework (Appendix 9, 10). Both students do not stress about homework or things like money and friends, although the first student said he has stress for significant periods of time (Appendix 11, 12, 13). They are both happy and spend a significant amount of time by themselves (Appendix 16, 18). The first student answered the last question, and he said, “Sometimes, I feel that my contributions are unhelpful during the Emerging Leaders program, when it comes to activities involving teamwork” (Appendix 26). All of this information seems to exemplify the characteristics of autism, although contrary to the stereotype that people with autism are isolated from the social world; both students spend time with others (Appendix 19). They both have supportive families and have special talents that set them apart from others (Appendix 20, 23).

I personally would respond to the survey as follows. WMU was my first choice for a college as was with the first student and Disability Services for Students assists students with autism well as both students mentioned (Appendix 2, 4). I have been able to find a major that I like as does the students and I have a good GPA (Appendix 7, 8). While I have been able to get my homework done on time and accurately like the students, I feel a little stress sometimes when my friends do not respond to me or are too busy for me (Appendix 9, 10, 12). I work out six days a week and am a member of the Kalamazoo Philharmonia (Appendix 21). I can play the piano

and viola well (Appendix 23). While I spend a lot of time by myself like the students and go home every weekend, the students and I both have a very supportive family (Appendix 20).

Assisting People with Autism.

Author Baron has looked into the problem of stress and how it is often overlooked in individuals with autism (15). For example, the author notes that some people with autism feel nervous about everything and the real world (16). Stress can come to people with autism when they are in the middle of a repetitive ritual and are interrupted (Baron 18). Baron points out that tantrums and aggression are often ways that those with autism deal with stress, which can increase stress (18, 19). Literature recommends that controlling and predicting stressors should be done by increasing social supports and exercise (Baron 26). Baron suggests that it is important for caregivers to view maladaptive behaviors as a result of stress so that they are more likely to help a person with autism find ways to reduce the stress (27). For example, daily schedules and cues can make events predictable and lead to some control, reducing stress (29). Relaxation therapy can be used anywhere and is a preventive strategy where one actively reduces stress through familiar routines (Baron 32). Sometimes, pictures are used to create a script that shows a coping strategy for a particular stressor and results in having a mental picture of how to cope with a stressor (Baron 33, 34).

The word autism often invokes images of a person who rocks back and forth, flaps his/her hands, and is distant from the social world (Baron 205). Baron points out that people with autism often have movement differences, such as difficulties in motor planning, switching movements, and motivation (209). Some individuals report that stress has made it difficult for them to switch their movements and also made them unaware of their bodies and movements (Baron 218). Baron notes that those with autism often feel stressed when they know that others

will judge them for their actions (220). For some people, they might experience a blending of senses or have unusual responses to them (Baron 221). Some individuals with autism have trouble stopping intrusive thoughts or changing adaptations for difficult situations (Baron 222). Baron suggests that soft and slow speech can help those with autism interact with others (235). Promoting confidence and self-esteem of people with autism can reduce the anxiety that they will face for an upcoming situation (Baron 236). Boredom often comes to people with autism when they do not know what to do while waiting or how long they will need to wait (Baron 330). Many students with autism report having good memory abilities but do not provide consistent and easily understood feedback. Often, specific directions on what to do for every situation are needed for those with autism instead of what not to do (Baron 340).

Some people with autism find that they can only remember what others said if the information is said slowly as noted by Clements (14). Giving important information too late can cause anxiety (Clements 16). Clements also points out that damage to one's physical and emotional health as well as their immune system can occur with people is isolation (19). Edwards suggests that cognitive therapies, medications, and vitamins can improve the behaviors of some people with autism, but not everyone (37, 38). Many people with autism enjoy physical activities, which can promote both physical and emotional well-being (Clements 125). Sometimes, interests can open up new relationships with others or be a route to employment (Clements 161).

Programs that enhance social understanding and improve interpersonal behaviors have shown to have positive effects on adults with autism such as finding better work (Howlin 64). Individual and family intervention programs also show to have positive effects (Howlin 65, 66). About 30% of individuals with autism do not have useful speech in adulthood, but even from

those who learn to talk, impairments can continue in adulthood (Howlin 67). While many individuals with superficially spoken language possess good vocabulary, Howlin points out that they might have comprehension difficulties, especially in social situations (68, 69). She notes that problems in intonation, delivery of speech, finding correct forms of words to express their ideas, delayed speech, repetitive language, and bluntness are all common in people with autism (71-76).

People with lower-functioning autism tend to avoid contact with others, while people with higher-functioning autism want to make friends and are more worried about the quality of interactions than being alone according to Howlin (99, 100). She notes that sometimes, if a person was friendly with someone with autism, then the person with autism might want to become friends with them, even if the person was just telling them something polite like good morning (102). People with autism are often vulnerable to the demands of others as they do not perceive someone else's actions as malicious (Howlin 104). Adherence to the rules and correcting others, even when it goes against social rules, such as telling others not to smoke, is common among people with autism (Howlin 113). Howlin reports that individuals with autism often have trouble knowing how or when to change their behavior and will often have behaviors that they had when they were children, even when they are too old for those behaviors (116). Personal hygiene is a skill that people with autism often struggle with (Howlin 120). People with autism will often comply with any requests made by others, even when the requests could cause them or others harm (Howlin 124). Howlin suggests that it is important for people with autism to discuss their difficulties with others so that interactions with others can go smoothly and there will be an escape route (126).

While stereotyped movements such as rocking back and forth and flapping hands are often less apparent in adults, changes in routines or boredom can sometimes cause these movements to come back (Howlin 144). Sometimes, obsessions with something as a child can be a source of fear later (Howlin 145). Howlin suggests that changes to the environment can often help people cope with any disruptive behaviors they have (148). When people learn of fearful situations, they will often try to avoid those situations, even if there is a low risk of the situation happening (Howlin 149). Howlin notes that making rules for people with autism can often reduce disruptive behaviors and obsessions (156). It is the inability to cope with unpredictable change that often causes the most problems for individuals with autism (Howlin 159). Relaxation techniques can often help those with autism deal with their fears and anxieties (Howlin 160). She points out that distracting techniques and thought-stopping can also help reduce the disruptiveness of certain behaviors (163). Autism is a lifelong disability, but treatment can have a huge impact on someone with autism, and 15% of people with autism can achieve self-sufficiency as adults (Volkmar "Autism"). Under the Americans with Disabilities Act, people with autism can self-advocate for rights in education and work ("Autism Spectrum Disorder", Handout).

Based on the research, I have two recommendations. All teachers and students should have awareness of disabilities and how to assist people with disabilities such as autism. If there is a class that has abstract content, the teachers should explain the content in such a way that it is straight forward. Colleges should provide more direct help such as social coaching for students with disabilities if they request it.

My College Experience with Autism.

As someone diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, I exhibit many of these same traits. While I have above average intellect, diligence with routine work, and excellent memory, I have a monotone voice, strong, narrow interests, indecisiveness, and I sometimes exhibit awkward gestures and struggle with working in groups and understanding abstract concepts. I tend to rock back and forth or jump sometimes. I also do not show much emotion, and it seems like many times, the only emotions I feel and really notice are anger and sadness with only a few moments of happiness. The lack of emotion and the tendency to dwell on events that upset me, even if the circumstance happened months and years ago and had no lasting impact has made me very upset at times. When I talk with others, I have a difficult time initiating conversation unless others are talking to me or around me, especially if the topic is of interest to me. My hobbies include video games, reading non-fiction books, watching YouTube videos, and playing music. I do not like it when people do not contact me back quickly, get upset at me for no reason, seem uninterested in me, smoke, walk slowly in front of me or get in the way, when things do not go my way sometimes, or when I find that I or someone else has wasted time.

When I became a student at Western Michigan University (WMU), I enrolled as a computer science major as I wanted to become a video game designer. I also enrolled as an honors college student and initiated services with Disability Services for Students (DSS). I came to WMU number three in my class due to all the hard work I have done in high school. At the end of the first week, I became very upset as I was spending a significant amount of time in my room, did not really have any friends to hang out with, and was not participating in Registered Student Organizations. I did end up making a couple of friends through my computer science major later on, and we hung out sometimes at Parkview or my dorm. I was also able to make a friend through the peer mentor program at DSS. Despite the fact that I had a couple of friends

and good grades, I continued to feel isolated my freshman year outside of hanging out as most of the time I was in my room. By the end of my first semester, I started leaving my room more, though I just hung out at the Bernhard Center, which I still do sometimes. Despite this, I decided to see a counselor at Sincuse my second semester in order to become more social, though due to the fact that she was not able to find direct help, I found that the counseling did not really help at all, plus I was already receiving good help through the peer mentor program. I became part of Alpha Lambda Delta that semester, which is an organization that helps WMU and the community through volunteering. During that semester, I was struggling with computer science as I was finding the content to be abstract and theoretical, which I could not understand as I have autism. While I was able to obtain an A in computer science 1 the previous semester since the content was not very abstract or theoretical, I withdrew from computer science 2 and the computer science degree due to the abstract and theoretical content. I decided afterwards to pursue a statistics degree as statistics would be concrete and straightforward as opposed to abstract and utilize my interests in numbers. I have always been able to understand math and statistics well since there are hardly any exceptions in how formulas and numbers work, which compliments how my mind with autism works.

In my second year, I randomly met a few people who had similar interests as me, and I became friends with them and started socializing more. Despite this, I was still alone for extended periods of time and would become upset sometimes when I was alone. I developed this notion that I always had to be with others. During my third semester, I became a part of Delta Alpha Pi, which is an organization aimed at eliminating the negative perceptions that people have about those with disabilities. At the end of the fourth semester, I became a part of the Workforce Recruitment Program (WRP), which is a program that helps students with disabilities

find jobs. Even so, my second year was much better than my first year due to socializing more. I was able to work at Disability Network Southwest Michigan as an Advocacy Academy intern the summer after my second year, though it was not through WRP. Through the Advocacy Academy, we interns were able to advocate for disability rights and had a bill passed that would allow for people to have their medical history available digitally when their ID is scanned by first responders.

During the middle of my fifth semester, I found that I was socializing less, and yet I was less apt to become upset when I was alone, except for one time when I had a panic attack. I was still trying to hang out with my friends, but I have found out this year that my friends either did not contact me back, or were too busy, even though I was generally not busy. During that semester, I also worked on homework so much that I would become upset sometimes, even though I did not have to get all the homework done right away. For no reason, I have had some anxiety since an incident at the beginning of the fifth semester involving a time when a friend's roommate told me I had no reason to be at their place after telling that person to not smoke while I was there. I should have left earlier as my friend was sleeping for a while. Even though he ended up forgiving me as I cried excessively afterwards and there was no lasting impact on anyone and was still allowed to come over, I developed an extreme hatred of my friend's roommate and smoking and can still remember the date, approximate time, and exact location of the incident. This hatred most likely came from the fact that it was the only time I decided to stay during the weekend, and I was having a good time with my friends the whole weekend before the incident. The anxiety that I have felt has sometimes become worse as time went by, though it has only seemed to happen at home when I am alone and escalates whenever I tell my parents about it, though part of the anxiety also comes from worrying about the future. I hope that getting

treatment during the summer will help relieve the anxiety. This semester, I have been hanging out even less due to my friends either not contacting me back or are too busy many times, but I am still okay with hanging out less for the most part. I have not had anxiety over homework this semester as there has not been much homework, although I ended up withdrawing from a class that I could not understand the contents well due to them being abstract and theoretical. Despite everything, this year was still better than my freshman year. I was able to get a summer job through WRP a few days ago. I have spoken in two autism panels this semester. I am also going to graduate a semester early in December. I have noticed through my whole college experience that I have had trouble making friends and officials at WMU could not go out and find friends for me, which is what I wish WMU could do. I also was not able to find a campus job, despite all of my qualifications. My roommates have never done much with me and I have and still go home on the weekends. I even decided to switch my Friday class this semester to a Wednesday class so that I can go home on Thursdays and come back Monday evenings.

Overall, I accept my diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder; even though I believe some of the characteristics of my disorder have had a negative impact on my life. I like my supportive family and that I have been able to receive good grades, but I wish I could be more social, be more decisive, and have more emotion so that I can relate more with others.

Appendix: Survey Questions

1. What gender do you identify yourself as? Male Female
2. Was WMU your first choice for a college? Yes No
3. Do you believe you are having a good experience at WMU? Yes No
4. Do you find that WMU assists students with autism well? Yes No
5. Do you find that Disability Services for Students assists students with autism well? Yes No
6. Have you been able to find a major that you can stick with? Yes No
7. Do you like the major you currently have? Yes No
8. Have you been able to maintain a high GPA (3.0 or higher) at WMU? Yes No
9. Are you generally able to get your homework done on time? Yes No
10. Do you generally find you are able to be accurate in your homework? Yes No
11. Do you stress out about homework or tests? Yes No
12. Do you stress out from other things such as money, emotions, body image, and friends? Yes No
13. Do you find yourself having stress for significant periods of time? Yes No
14. Do you participate in any extracurricular activities or Registered Student Organizations?
Yes No
15. Are you thinking about participating in any extracurricular activities or Registered Student Organizations? Yes No
16. Are you generally happy? Yes No
17. Do you have any mental illnesses such as depression or anxiety? Yes No
18. Do you spend significant amounts of time by yourself? Yes No
19. Do you spend time with others? Yes No
20. Do you have a supportive family? Yes No
21. Are you physically active most days? Yes No
22. Do you eat healthy food most of the time? Yes No
23. Do you have any special talents that set you apart from others? Yes No
24. Do you experience any sensory overloads when, for example, there is too much noise, touch, or light? Yes No

25. Do you believe you have had difficulties in college such as anxiety, loneliness, stress, depression, etc. because of your autism? Yes No

26. Is there anything else you would like to discuss about how your autism affects your experiences at WMU?

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