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Exploring Employment Experiences from the Perspectives of Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Cross-Case Analysis

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**Exploring Employment Experiences from the Perspectives of
Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Cross-Case Analysis**

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Exploring Employment Experiences from the Perspectives of Adults with Autism Spectrum
Disorder: A Cross-Case Analysis

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Author Note

For this paper, we decided to use person-first language when referring to individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder. In academia, it is commonplace to utilize this terminology however, there is starting to be a shift with this mindset. We understand and value identity first language, i.e., an Autistic person, and appreciate individuals' ability to choose their preference. When results are shared, we represent the participant's preferences accordingly.

Abstract

Autism Spectrum Disorder, commonly referred to as ASD or autism, is a neurological disorder defined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual 5th edition (DSM-5). Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, as well as restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities are included in the diagnostic criteria (DSM-5).

Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) face disproportionately high levels of unemployment and underemployment (Khalifa et al., 2020). Engagement in work is a meaningful occupation that helps shape one's identity and is a vital part of an individual's wellbeing (Hedley et al., 2018). One's participation in work often defines them and gives them a sense of purpose (Scott et al., 2018), and workplace participation can positively impact social connections, independence, and quality of life (Valentini et al., 2018).

There are facilitators and barriers to employment that have been identified that generally hold true (Khalifa et al., 2020; Muller, et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2018); however, because ASD presents as a spectrum each individual may have a different story. Currently, the literature has an array of helpful information from different perspectives from key stakeholders in employment including parents, employers, and co-workers (Albright et al., 2020; Muller et al., 2018; Murfitt et al., 2018; Valentini et al., 2019); however, there is a lack of detailed firsthand perspectives describing unique experiences from those with ASD. Giving the ASD community a voice and listening to their unique experiences can help raise awareness of their capabilities and provide valuable insight into a key stakeholder's perspective that has often been overlooked.

Introduction

Engagement in work is a meaningful occupation that helps shape one's identity and is a vital part of an individual's wellbeing (Hedley et al., 2018). One's participation in work often defines them and gives them a sense of purpose (Scott et al., 2018), and workplace participation can positively impact social connections, independence, and quality of life (Valentini et al., 2018). Although current federal regulations mandate the integration of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) into the workforce, the implementation of these regulations is often a rarity (Valentini et al., 2018). While it is true some employment opportunities do exist for these individuals, these experiences are often below industry norms with lower wages, limited hours, and segregated environments (Carter et al., 2011; Valentini et al., 2018). These trends dominate the work experience for individuals with disabilities. This is an unacceptable reality for a society that prides itself on diversity and equality.

For individuals with Autism, this is an even more prevalent experience (Coleman & Adams, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2020). These individuals face unique hardships in both finding and maintaining meaningful employment compared to individuals with IDD. Currently, the literature has an array of helpful information from different perspectives from key stakeholders in employment including parents, employers, and co-workers (Albright et al., 2020; Muller et al., 2018; Murfitt et al., 2018; Valentini et al., 2019); however, there is a lack of detailed firsthand perspectives describing the unique experiences from those with ASD. There is a need to understand these individuals' experiences in depth in order to better equip society to see the capabilities these individuals can have. Facilitating a shift in societal thinking can create opportunities for individuals with ASD to participate in meaningful employment.

The lack of meaningful engagement in employment of individuals with ASD is a social justice issue. According to Fraser's theory of social justice, "justice means parity of participation" (Mladenov, 2016, p. 1237). According to this description, "a society is just only when it enables all of its adult members to interact with each other as peers, and this necessarily includes disabled people" (Mladenov, 2016, p.1228). Therefore, the inequality and underrepresentation of individuals with ASD present in the workforce evidently presents itself as a social justice issue. In order for all individuals, with and without a disability, to participate at the same rate, systemic change needs to be made. One option for initiating systemic change is to "transform culture in-depth by deconstructing the underlying frameworks that produce differences in the first place" (Mladenov, 2016, p. 1229). There are several different ways to go about solving such issues. An issue as large as this does not have one simple solution, since the problems are multifaceted in nature. Oftentimes, different ideologies can create different answers to social dilemmas.

Literature Review

Autism Overview

Autism Spectrum Disorder, commonly referred to as ASD or autism, is a neurological disorder defined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual 5th edition, (DSM-5) that results from a change in brain function which causes a wide range of manifestations. The cause has yet to be determined; however, it is commonly thought that a change in brain function occurs due to genetic variation combined with environmental factors (Kazukauskas, 2018).

Specific diagnostic criteria, as determined by the DSM-5, include:

Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, such as (1) deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, (2) deficits in nonverbal

communicative behaviors used for social interaction, and (3) deficits in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships.

Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities, as determined by having at least two of the following: (1) stereotype or repetitive motor movements, use of objects, or speech, (2) insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns of verbal or nonverbal behavior, (3) highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus, and/or (4) hyperreactivity or hypo reactivity to sensory input or unusual interest in sensory aspects of the environment.

Symptoms must be present in the early developmental period in order to have an ASD diagnosis. Symptoms have to cause significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning, that are not better explained by an intellectual disability or global developmental delay. (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, pp. 50-51)

Despite these guiding criteria for common symptoms, ASD presents across a continuum in actual functioning. In other words, each individual is uniquely affected with different severities of the manifestations. Depending on the level of severity, ASD can have negative effects on one's overall functioning and quality of life (Kazukauskas, 2018).

In recent years, there has been a rise in the prevalence of cases of ASD (Miller-Kuhaneck, p. 766, 2015). In 2016, it was estimated that 1 in 54 children have ASD (Maenner et al., 2020). This number has been steadily increasing over the last fifteen years. For perspective, in the year 2000 it was estimated that 1 in 150 children had ASD (Maenner et al., 2020). It is also important to note that boys are four and a half times more likely to have this disorder across all social groups (Kazukauskas, p. 171, 2018).

Despite common misconceptions, ASD is not an intellectual disability. Although it is possible for individuals to have co-occurring intellectual disabilities, it is important to differentiate between the two. The Center for Disease Control Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network reports that 68% of individuals with ASD function with intellectual skills that are borderline, average, or above average (Kazukauskas, p. 171, 2018). Only 31% of those with ASD have a diagnosis of a co-occurring intellectual disability (Kazukauskas, p. 171, 2018).

People with ASD oftentimes have impaired social skills and difficulty participating in social settings. More specifically, this can present as difficulty with social communication and forming friendships (Miller-Kuhaneck, 2015). Other skills that become troublesome for those with ASD include issues with attention, empathy, and flexibility (Kazukauskas, 2018). Difficulties with social participation can lead to many problems as a person with ASD progresses to young adulthood including underemployment, unemployment, and social isolation (Miller-Kuhaneck, 2015).

In addition to difficulties with social skills, individuals with ASD also process sensory stimuli differently (Kazukauskas, 2018). People with ASD may be hyper reactive or hyporeactive to sensory input (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Sensory processing disorder is not unique to ASD; however, many people with ASD also experience a range of sensory processing deficits. Specifically, people with sensory processing deficits and ASD tend to overreact to sounds, touch, tastes, and smells. Additionally, they may have poor eye contact and an avoidance to social touch. These sensory processing deficits may be linked to problem behaviors and impaired social skills (Miller-Kuhaneck, 2015).

ASD presents uniquely within each individual, whereas functioning fluctuates across a spectrum. Therefore, the supports needed and combination of services differ for each individual. Interventions should focus on the individual and their unique needs. There are different possible outcomes from services that individuals with ASD receive: Decreasing maladaptive behavioral manifestations, reducing mental health issues, and decreasing the burden on the caregiver (Kazukauskas, 2018). There are many different intervention approaches to achieve these outcomes. According to Miller-Kuhaneck (2015), some of the most common interventions include applied behavior analysis (ABA), positive behavioral support (PBS), the Cognitive Orientation to Daily Occupational Performance Approach (CO-OP), and the Ayres Sensory Integration Theory and Sensory strategies (Miller-Kuhaneck, 2015). ABA aims to change the individual's behaviors often associated with the typical presentation of ASD. ABA rewards desired behaviors through positive reinforcement and aims to decrease negative behaviors by providing undesirable consequences or ignoring them (Miller-Kuhaneck, 2015). CO-OP is better suited for individuals with high-functioning ASD. CO-OP is a cognitive approach that focuses on observational learning, internal motivations for learning, and the generalization of skills to everyday life. Likewise, it is characterized by a strategy known as "Goal-Plan-Do-Check", which is driven by the individual (Miller-Kuhaneck, 2015). Finally, the Ayres Sensory Integration approach, oftentimes facilitated by an occupational therapist, focuses on the sensory processing system. Modifications of tasks and the environment to better suit the individual's sensory needs can enhance performance, engagement, and participation across occupations (Miller-Kuhaneck, 2015). Although there are several options for interventions for those with ASD, some individuals prefer to look at ASD as something to be embraced.

Neurodiversity Movement

The understanding of medical conditions and their solutions in the United States are often dictated by the medical model. The medical model views medical conditions as problems and is largely diagnosis driven. The medical model emphasizes normalcy based on societal values and norms, and it aims to get individuals to fit these norms by eliminating perceived problems (Peterson, 2018). Under this model, a commonly held construction is that when individuals with ASD present with impairments in different areas, the person and their symptoms need to be changed. Therefore, individuals with ASD are hindered by the medical model's desire to make everyone fit the norm (Albright et al., 2020). However, many people within the ASD community are unsupportive of this approach and seek to discredit it (Brownlow, 2010).

In our society today, there is emphasis placed upon the idea that individuals with ASD can thrive when given the proper support. ASD is not a disease to be fixed; rather, it is a unique skillset to be appreciated.

Neurodiversity, a term created by a sociologist, Judy Singer, emphasizes that all human brains function differently (Brownlow, 2010). With regard to ASD, it seeks to emphasize that ASD results from differences in brain function, rather than deficits (Brownlow, 2010). Recently, this has become a popular term in the battle to destigmatize ASD. Neurologically typical, or NT, are individuals without ASD, while neurodiverse includes those with ASD (Brownlow, 2010). This view was shared by one individual with ASD on a discussion post about the goals for treatment of autism:

The goal should be to help the autistic child develop in a way that will make a relatively decent life possible, not to make him into an NT [neurotypical] clone. That's not real; a

cat trained to fetch and wag his tail when happy is a trained cat, not a dog. (Brownlow, 2010, p. 252)

Enabling individuals with ASD to live purposeful and productive lives as contributing members of society is something that is also important; however, it can often be overlooked in a society dominated by the medical model (Kazukauskas, 2018).

Neurodiversity inherently matches with a social model of disability, wherein societal constructs of barriers are more inhibitory than the classification of symptoms (Brownlow, 2010). With this, the stigmas attached to ASD are perpetuated by societal standards, which in turn creates major barriers for these individuals when trying to integrate more fully within society. Trying to change societal standards and increase acceptance is a more appropriate approach to reaching inclusion within society (Albright et al., 2020).

When viewing ASD as a neurodiverse difference rather than a deficit to be fixed, it is evident that both neurotypical and neurodivergent individuals have strengths and weaknesses. Thus, priority intervention for those with ASD keeps functional independence and quality of life at the forefront of the objectives (Kazukauskas, 2018). On a discussion board with a group of individuals with ASD, one shared:

Can you imagine what it would be like if every time that one of your own kind was born, the parents of that child typically responded in shock and horror, as if a terrible tragedy had happened?...These parents, in an attempt to reverse the tragedy that is the birth of one of my kind, immediately begin investigating all sorts of therapies, training programs, nutritional supplements, special diets, and drugs, in the interest of “fixing” their poor, damaged child. Can you imagine what it would be like if expectations of you were so low that it was considered heroic to teach you the most basic of self-care skills? If a normal

kid improves, it is development; if one of my kind improves, it HAS to be the result of some heroic action from a normal person. (Brownlow, 2010, p. 251)

Both the neurotypical and neurodiverse have the potential to make positive contributions to society, and both should be provided with the proper resources to facilitate success (Brownlow, 2010).

Transition Programs

In accordance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004, all students regardless of their abilities need to be provided with Free and Appropriate Public Education. A primary goal of special education services is to prepare individuals with disabilities to enter the workforce upon graduation from high school (Carter et al., 2011). Currently, there is an aim for students with disabilities in the school system to be equipped with the skills needed to successfully transition to the workforce upon graduation (Valentini et al., 2018) and to live an independent life (Clifton et al. 2017). One factor shown to be helpful in obtaining employment after graduation is the integration of community-based transition services during the school years (Valentini et al., 2018). Similarly, opportunities prior to graduation to explore career interests, sample different jobs, learn about the norms of workplaces, and gain practical skills can be incorporated into high school programs to improve working outcomes (Valentini et al., 2018). Furthermore, when provided with the proper resources throughout their educational experiences, transition programs and school programs have the potential to create positive outcomes for individuals with ASD (Wehman et al., 2014).

In addition to the course work and job readiness programs, school programs have the potential to facilitate social interactions and participation for students with ASD. Although it may not be a direct component of most transition programs, the social interactions and

participation in social activities in school can be a valuable experience for individuals with ASD. Throughout life after graduation, a lack of interpersonal skills can impede on one's ability to fully engage and participate in occupations such as work. The often-difficult transition from school to post-secondary life can be better facilitated by promoting situations that support the growth of a student's interpersonal skills in school, which can be carried over throughout their life (Wehman et al., 2014).

While it is true that transition programs have the potential and aim to better transition individuals with ASD from school to life after graduation, the unfortunate reality is that in general, these transition services may not be meeting the needs of the students (Valentini et al., 2018). There is a large amount of variability with transition programs between schools (Johnson et al., 2020; Wehman et al., 2014), and some transition services do not start early enough to yield the most successful employment results (Johnson et al., 2020). The ASD community experiences a wide array of educational experiences during high school, ranging from special education and general education courses, with most of their coursework in the special education setting (Wehman et al., 2014).

Although an aim of special education services is to prepare individuals for life after graduation (Carter et al., 2011), Clifton et al., (2017) noted the main focus of transition within the educational realm is to meet certain requirements to achieve a degree, rather than to successfully prepare these individuals for the realities of adulthood. In their study, Clifton et al., (2017) interviewed educators in some Midwestern school districts in the United States who were directly involved in educating students with ASD. One of the transition coordinators interviewed shared that he/she "felt that the instructional system was failing the students and that this was beyond his/her control" (p. 44). Likewise, the special education consultant who developed the

curriculum for students with ASD shared that success was seen more in terms of pleasing students' parents, rather than successfully transitioning students to adulthood (Clifton et al., 2017).

Furthermore, Wehman et al., (2014) shared similar concerns about the effectiveness of current transition programs. Even though individuals with ASD receive services, "this does not appear to translate into success in adulthood" (Wehman et al., 2014, p. 31). The unfortunate reality is that many students with ASD "leave high school unprepared for adult life at work, in college, or in community living" (Wehman et al., 2014, p. 31). Compared to their peers with speech and language impairments, learning disabilities, or intellectual disabilities, individuals with ASD have lower rates of participation in employment, vocational or technical education, and 2- or 4-year educational programs (Wehman et al., 2014).

The inconsistency and lack of successful outcomes of transition programs is further demonstrated in The National Longitudinal Transition Study. This study began collecting data during the 2000-2001 school year and continued collecting data in two-year intervals over a 10-year period. The sampling process was conducted so that the results would be generalizable to students receiving special education services in the United States (Shogren & Plotner, 2012). From the longitudinal study, it was determined that the average age for transition planning was 14.4 years old for students with ASD (Shogren & Plotner, 2012, p. 8). Compared to students with intellectual disabilities and other disabilities, students with ASD were the least likely to actively participate in their own transition planning process in their schools. Specifically, they were the least likely to attend their own transition planning meetings (Shogren & Plotner, 2012, p. 10). However, when students with ASD were present in their meetings, they were more likely

to have an advocate present at their meetings compared to students with other disabilities (Shogren & Plotner, 2012, p. 10).

At a statistically significant level, parents of students with ASD found the process of planning for their child's life after school the least helpful, when compared to parental viewpoints of those with students who have intellectual disabilities and other disabilities (Shogren & Plotner, 2012, p. 12). Likewise, they reported that their children with ASD were "significantly less likely to have met with teachers to set post-graduation goals" (Shogren & Plotner, 2012, p. 12). In the longitudinal study, only 66% of students with ASD "had an IEP that specifically linked the student's course of study to transition goals" (Shogren & Plotner, 2012, p. 13). Furthermore, when goals were related to employment, students with ASD were more likely than students with intellectual disability to have goals related to sheltered and less-competitive employment (Shogren & Plotner, 2012, p. 14). Students with ASD were also less likely to have goals related to independent living compared to students with intellectual disabilities and other disabilities (Shogren & Plotner, 2012, p. 15). Not addressing these skills throughout the educational curriculum hinders employment later in life: Nicholas et al., (2018) found that independence with daily living skills correlates to higher success in employment since people usually need this baseline of skills before they can take on other roles.

As a whole, individuals with ASD are not developing the same sense of autonomy compared to their peers. In general, they continue to be dependent on parental supports for their basic needs. This suggests that the transition programs are not adequately preparing adolescents and young adults with ASD to transition to adulthood, employment, post-secondary education, or life in general. A shift to a more transition-focused education can help students better prepare for their postschool lives (Wehman et al., 2014). Wehman et al. (2014) shared, "transition cannot

just be paper, meetings, and hope; rather, it must be an active, collaborative process. Transition for youth with ASD must take place before students exit school” (p. 33). Transition planning needs to be a collaborative and engaging process with hands-on experiences prior to graduating. When possible, paid work experiences and intensive job coaching while still in high school can improve the difficult transition from high school to life after graduation (Wehman et al., 2014). Likewise, when asked to identify service needs for students after graduation, teachers who were surveyed in The National Longitudinal Transition Study reported that students with ASD (55%) were significantly more likely than students with intellectual disability (34%) to need vocational training, placement, or support (Shogren & Plotner, 2012, p. 18).

Regardless of the effectiveness of school transition programs, they are oftentimes viewed as a “bridge to nowhere” due to the drop-off in support upon completion of high school (Carter et al., 2011; Kazukauskas, 2018). This gap in transitioning from school to the workforce, for individuals with ASD and all disabilities, creates difficulties in obtaining and maintaining meaningful employment after graduation (Carter et al., 2011).

Individuals with Autism in the Workforce

In general, there is a large gap in employment between persons with disabilities and persons without disabilities (Brucker et al., 2016; Hedley et al., 2017; Khalifa et al., 2020). While it is true that the ASD community consists of a spectrum of presentation of symptoms, there is a large number of people who are willing and able to work. Many people with ASD have significant untapped potential and are historically underappreciated (Wehman et al., 2014). Due to numerous factors, this community still faces disproportionate levels of unemployment and underemployment (Khalifa et al., 2020). The National Autism Indicators Report from 2015 reported that individuals with ASD were the most unemployed group of adults when compared

to other disabilities (Coleman & Adams, 2018), even though nearly half of all individuals with ASD have average or above average intelligence (Hensel, 2017; Kazukauskas, 2018).

Some studies have estimated the unemployment rate among adults with ASD to be as high as 50-75% (Khalifa et al., 2020, p. 1316). This number will only continue to grow if change is not made to integrate these individuals into the workforce. Some estimate that there will be a 230% increase in the number of young adults with ASD in the next decade, thus creating a larger population of unemployed individuals (Hensel, 2017, p. 75).

When people with ASD are employed, they are often underemployed and overeducated in their qualifications. Commonly held positions include entry-level jobs in hospitals, universities, or food services. Tasks such as serving food, cleaning, basic office tasks, and preparing test tubes are among the activities in the positions (Khalifa et al., 2020).

From a purely economic view, unemployment of people with ASD comes with considerable detriments to society. The economic costs associated with ASD come from numerous sectors: Health, education, social, housing, transportation, employment, welfare benefits, and labor markets (Buescher et al., 2014). Associated costs include special education services, residential accommodation, medical care, and productivity losses in adulthood. Employment support and loss of employment are also identified as contributors in the estimates (Buescher et al., 2014). As noted in a 2014 literature review conducted by Buescher et al., in the United States, the cost of supporting an individual with an ASD and intellectual disability during his or her lifespan is estimated to be \$2.4 million, and the cost of supporting an individual with an ASD without an intellectual disability is \$1.4 million (p. 721). Likewise, other studies on the economic impact of ASD in the United States estimate the cost for adults with ASD to be between \$175-196 billion, excluding benefits (Hedley, et al., 2017). For perspective, a study

conducted in Canada estimates that only a 2% increase in employment of people with disabilities in Ontario would result in a \$151 million decrease in support payments (Hedley et al., 2017).

Employment of adults with ASD means that individuals will have less reliance on government funds (Khalifa et al., 2020).

In general, there is a large funding gap for the support of all people with disabilities in the workforce. For example, in the 2008 fiscal year \$4.3 billion of the total \$357.4 billion in federal and state funding directed towards supporting persons with disabilities was allocated towards education, training, and employment (Brucker et al., 2016, p. 132). Thus, the fraction of the budget utilized notably contributes to the lack of supports for individuals with disabilities in the workforce.

Despite the long-standing reality of unemployment and underemployment for adults with ASD, advocacy and education together have the potential to create more job opportunities for individuals with ASD (Capo, 2001). In a study with 34 employment support workers, conducted by Rashid et al. (2017), it was a common trend to understand the need for matching the job with the skills of the individual. For example, one participant shared:

Really getting to know who our clients are and making sure we're marketing their skills instead of going in and being like 'somebody has a disability, give them a job'... Pulling on their heartstrings doesn't work for most business minded people, so really changing our approach and highlighting those skills...that they actually do have the skills to contribute to the companies. (p. 3513)

Listening to successful stories of individuals with ASD in the workforce can help to create personal connections and can help employers formulate their own beliefs about the ASD community.

Further, some employment support specialists want to take it further than just acquiring the job itself. In a study conducted by Rashid et al., (2017) one employment specialist believed that, “inclusion in the workplace should go beyond job tasks to engagement in relationship formation, coffee break (informal) engagement, and extracurricular activities" (p. 3515). Likewise, Nicholas et al., (2015), explains that the process of employment needs to move beyond just simply reaching the goal of employment itself: “Vocation is deemed to more broadly comprise meaningful, routine, sustained activity that is growth provoking, personally rewarding, and often associated with the provision of a living wage” (p. 236). These are valuable insights; however, it is important to understand what elements individuals with ASD deem satisfiable in engaging in a workplace environment.

Potential Reasons for Not Hiring

It is evident that there is a gap in employment for individuals with ASD, and that employment is a multifaceted and complex problem. One of the reasons why individuals with ASD are not engaged in the workforce results from difficulty getting hired for positions. There are many factors that influence the hiring process. Some of these factors include initial impressions, employer connection to the ASD community, and legal factors.

There are many different reasons why an employer may or may not consider hiring someone with ASD. In general, employers look for specific personal traits when hiring individuals. For example, employers look for soft skills and social skills when considering individuals for a position. In addition, in some settings the skill of being able to sense what other people need and taking the initiative to act on it are seen as essential qualities. Employers will also consider job specific skills, and whether or not the applicant possesses them (Albright et al.,

2020). In a study by Nicholas et al., (2018), employers identified teamwork, confidence, and communication as skills that are valuable to be competitively employed across the general population. With that being said, even though the Americans with Disabilities Act protects qualified applicants with disabilities like ASD in the hiring process, people with ASD may struggle to prove that they are qualified due to impairments in interpersonal and communication skills (Scott et al., 2018). If they are unable to prove that they are qualified in the interview process, they will not get the chance to participate in the occupation of work.

In addition, due to employer's general lack of understanding and awareness of ASD, individuals with ASD are oftentimes less likely to be hired (Johnson, et al., 2020). Without prior experiences with individuals with ASD, employers are more likely to focus on the repetitive or perceived negative behaviors that someone with ASD may possess rather than the individual's potential and capabilities (Johnson et al., 2020). Furthermore, without knowledge about ASD and their engagement in the workforce, employers may have concerns related to the perceived costs associated with accommodating employees with disabilities, fear of having to provide too much supervision, and fear of legal liabilities (Muller et al., 2018).

On the contrary, people with ASD are more likely to be hired when employers have personal experiences with the ASD community. These employers are more likely to see the positive characteristics of individuals with ASD. Consequently, employers are able to identify the potential for a mutually beneficial relationship between one another (Scott et al., 2018). For example, individuals with ASD are less likely to engage in social interaction, thus allowing for less distractions and increased productivity (Capo, 2001). In a study conducted by Albright, et al., (2020) one employer identified feeling the need to promote inclusivity and be representative of the community in which their business resides as a reason for employing people with ASD.

Similarly, in a study analyzing factors related to employers and their willingness to collaborate with school-based transition programs conducted by Valentini et al., (2018) employer's previous connection with individuals with disabilities, a feeling of social responsibility, or altruism were identified as factors related to hiring individuals with ASD. However, it is recommended that employers move away from this charity-driven approach and do so by recognizing the capacity of these individuals to contribute to the workplace (Rashid et al., 2017). Understanding the lived experiences of individuals with ASD who are successfully engaging in the workplace and contributing as members of society can help employers shift their mentality, thus positively impacting outcomes for individuals with ASD.

In addition to personal connections, there are numerous legal factors that may influence the hiring of individuals with ASD. For example, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) supports accessibility for potential employees with disabilities (Tamburo et al., 2019). Other acts, such as the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 with the Americans with Disabilities Amendments Act of 2008, serve as legalities that protect individuals with disabilities in employment (Hensel, 2017). In addition, companies may have to meet quotas set by an amendment to section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. This amendment requires some federal contractors to "attempt to achieve a workforce composed of at least 7% of employees with disabilities" (Hensel, 2017, pp. 75-76). Likewise, other requirements have added incentives for companies to employ people with disabilities. All of these legal factors contribute to the hiring of individuals with ASD (Hensel, 2017); however, if their disability is not discernable these legalities may not be initially considered (Rashid et al., 2017).

Currently, there are several reasons why individuals with ASD are being left out from the workforce. Therefore, understanding ones' lived experiences can help discourage employers

from seeing hiring these individuals as an act of charity and change to view it as one of contribution.

Benefits of Work

When people with ASD are hired for a job and can actively engage in the workforce, there are benefits to both the individual and the employer. Oftentimes, individuals with ASD have a desire to be employed: A crucial part of an individual's sense of self-worth is related to participating as a contributing member of society (Hedley et al., 2017; Scott et al., 2018). There are many benefits that come alongside working (Hedley et al., 2018). First and foremost, being employed has positive effects on an individual's well-being and quality of life. Employment has been linked to improvements in cognitive functioning, mental health, and physical health, as compared to those who are unemployed (Hedley et al., 2017; Khalifa et al., 2020). Additionally, for many workers, employment provides financial stability and thus can provide an increased sense of independence (Hedley et al., 2018; Khalifa et al., 2020). Trainees with ASD in a study conducted by Hedley et al. (2018), shared that their employment resulted in notable improvements with social relationships with co-workers and general daily interactions (Hedley et al., 2018).

When individuals with disabilities are denied the chance to work, it has repercussions on more than our society alone. The 2009 Report to the President sums up the issue perfectly: "While the lost productivity and costs associated with publicly financed support services can be roughly calculated, the loss in dignity and quality of life is incalculable" (Mank, 2009, p. 12).

In a study conducted by Muller et al., employers described their experiences with regard to the employment of Project SEARCH interns. Project SEARCH is an employment training model currently being implemented across the United States. It aims to increase employer

capacity, as well as the potential for individuals with disabilities to become employed (Muller et al., 2018). A common theme that emerged was that employment of people with ASD and other developmental disabilities helped to create a positive work environment. One employer noticed that having an intern from project SEARCH helped to encourage teamwork and increased team building of everyone in the work environment. In response to this, staff morale notably increased (Muller et al., 2018).

From an economic standpoint, Murfitt et al., (2018) concluded that over time, hiring individuals with disabilities typically does not cost companies more than other employees. Hensel (2017) found that there is an initial investment in the employment of people with ASD, but once they are employed and trained, they are likely to continue working for the same company making the company investment pay off. Likewise, employees with disabilities have been reported to be more dedicated to their jobs. Typically, these individuals remain in the same job for a longer period of time as compared to individuals without a disability (Khalifa et al., 2018; Murfitt et al., 2018). Thus, this minimizes the need for the constant re-hiring and re-training of new employees.

Wehman et al., (2012) sought to discover information about supported employment for those with ASD. One notable finding from this study was that as time went on, supports in the workplace decreased for those with ASD. This suggests that these individuals have the potential to participate in competitive employment and as they become more adjusted to their work environment, their independence increases. Likewise, as supports decrease over time, so should the cost of providing these services (Wehman et al., 2012). Nevertheless, despite the benefits to both the individual and the company as a whole, individuals with ASD still face unemployment and underemployment (Miller-Kuhaneck, 2015).

Facilitators and Barriers for Workplace Success

Despite the overwhelming benefits associated with working, unemployment still remains a reality for those with ASD. To further understand some of the reasons why individuals with ASD are being left out of the workforce at disproportionate rates, it is crucial to recognize some of the main contributing factors that act as barriers for workplace success. Additionally, it is also important to understand what contributes to positive work experiences and the factors that help to facilitate success in the workforce.

Barriers for Workplace Success

Although each individual is unique and may experience different combinations of barriers to participation in the workplace, some of the most common ones include personal barriers, environmental barriers, and social barriers. It is important to note that although not discussed further, the effects of larger community resources cannot be overlooked. Access to transportation, housing, food, healthcare, and an income are inextricably linked to obtaining employment for all individuals (Nicholas et al., 2018).

Personal Barriers. While it is true that there are many assets that equip people with ASD to work in various settings, there are also personal characteristics that tend to act as barriers to engagement in successful employment. In an online vocational survey conducted by Coleman & Adams (2018), individuals with ASD and their parents identified common barriers to workplace participation. One of these included personal factors such as being unsure of the work they want to do. Likewise, participants identified difficulties in finding a job to apply for and getting past initial interviews. Finally, if employed, participants identified difficulties in maintaining a job over time (Coleman & Adams, 2018).

As noted in the DSM-5, individuals with ASD have persistent deficits in communication and social interaction across multiple contexts (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Consequently, this decrease in social skills manifests into barriers in the workforce (Albright et al., 2020; Nicholas et al., 2018; Pfeiffer et al., 2017). For example, adults with ASD are more likely to lose their employment due to social or behavioral difficulties, rather than their performance executing assigned tasks (Khalifa et al., 2020). Compared to other disabilities, ASD is more likely to go unnoticed upon initial interaction. Consequently, these individuals are unconsciously held to higher standards compared to those with a more visible disability. This is likely due to the fact that visible disabilities are more recognizable, and society is more likely to cater to their needs. However, within the ASD population, oftentimes the manifestations of the disorder are not visibly apparent, making it easily misunderstood by coworkers and customers (Rashid et al., 2017).

People with ASD may lack the soft skills that employers find desirable (Hensel, 2017), which translates into situations involving poor social interactions. In many roles, employees need to be able to communicate efficiently and effectively with customers. However, this is not always easy for individuals with ASD (Albright et al., 2020). The logical black and white thinking patterns typical to individuals with ASD can make interpreting social interactions difficult (Hensel, 2017).

In addition to social skills, cognitive inflexibility may also be a barrier for some individuals. In some cases, the repetitive nature of some individuals with ASD may facilitate success due to their ability to effectively work on monotonous tasks. However, in other cases, cognitive inflexibility can pose as a barrier to engagement in employment, as many jobs today require flexibility to balance multiple responsibilities. Thus, employees need to be skillful in

adapting to change with ease, which can be difficult for individuals with ASD (Albright et al., 2020). Likewise, other life skills such as difficulty managing impulsive behaviors and decreased executive functioning skills can cause hardship in the workplace (Nicholas et al., 2018). Anxiety, restricted interests and routines, and sensory processing difficulties may also serve as personal barriers to success in the workplace (Pfeiffer et al., 2017).

Environmental Barriers. An individual with ASD may be able to successfully complete all the job tasks with regard to their cognitive abilities but failing to acknowledge the effects of the environment can be detrimental, severely limiting one's capacity to perform effectively (Pfeiffer et al., 2017). To assist in understanding the different environmental factors that affect one's capacity to work, the physical and social environment are discussed separately. However, it is imperative to understand that these two factors do not exist independently of one another. In order to comprehend the full extent to which these components impact an individual's ability to work successfully, their interconnectedness needs to be recognized and understood. When combined, the totality of the impact is much greater than if each factor were to stand alone.

Several studies have noted the negative effects that physical factors can have on an individual's functioning in a workplace environment. Due to the unique processing system of sensory stimuli for those with ASD, these difficulties correlate into challenges in the workplace. More specifically, environmental factors, such as bright lights and loud noises, can impede one's production of work (Albright et al., 2020; Khalifa et al., 2020; Pfeiffer et al., 2017). The texture and fabric of a uniform can also present challenges due to hypersensitive tactile stimulation (Albright et al., 2020; Pfeiffer et al., 2017). Visual distractions, such as people constantly moving around and a cluttered desk space, as well as competing auditory stimuli of multiple people holding conversations at once, are also noted to negatively impact one's ability to function

effectively in the workplace (Pfeiffer et al., 2017). When these overwhelming stimuli were addressed and altered, thus creating a better person-environment fit, employees with ASD noted positive increases in their work performance (Pfeiffer et al., 2017). When appropriate supports are not available and perpetuated, maintaining employment becomes an issue (Hedley et al., 2017).

Social Barriers. As it is noted in the DSM-5 social communication is an area in which individuals with ASD struggle. This can present unique challenges with regard to employment (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Work environments themselves are often filled with unspoken social rules and changing expectations, which can be hard to navigate for those with ASD (Hensel, 2017).

A common theme across studies is the lack of understanding about ASD from employers and co-workers (Coleman & Adams, 2018; Nicholas et al., 2018). While oftentimes not purposeful, this unfamiliarity creates a work environment that is susceptible to stereotypes, stigma, and negative attitudes towards others (Muller et al., 2018; Nicholas et al., 2018; Rashid et al., 2017). This lack of understanding across the work environment leads to a lack of patience, supportive policies, and accommodations for these individuals (Nicholas et al., 2018). This lack of understanding also has the potential to lead to jobs ending prematurely, as problems with co-workers or certain tasks arise without any justification as to why (Capo, 2001).

In a letter to the editor, Bury et al., (2019) raises awareness about the ‘autism advantage’. This term has recently become popular across different platforms with regard to the skillset of individuals with ASD in the workforce. It is commonly associated with symptoms found in the DSM-5 and aligns with the typical presentation of ASD such as attention to detail and repetitive interests (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Bury et al., 2019). While it is true that many

individuals with ASD do excel in these tasks, not everyone with ASD possesses these traits. Unfortunately, these common manifestations of ASD are oftentimes quick to be associated with every individual with an ASD diagnosis. Bury et al., (2019) cautions strongly against this ideology. He claims, “an emphasis on strengths is sorely needed” (p. 1608), but he cautions against imposing this stereotype on all individuals with ASD. When this occurs, job satisfaction is likely to decrease and minimization of one’s true potential is likely to occur. (Bury et al., 2019).

Similarly, Bury et al., (2019) wrote:

We acknowledge that there are areas in which individuals with autism perform exceptionally and appreciate the importance of identifying their strengths and supporting them appropriately. However, it is also important to remind ourselves that not all individuals with autism have superior skills, nor should they have to, to secure employment. The ‘autism advantage’ may prove a double-edged sword; while, it is beneficial in raising awareness, it also has the potential to place unreasonable expectations on average John (or Jane for that matter!). (p. 1608)

Therefore, it is necessary to shine a light on these individuals and their unique skill sets. However, in doing so, caution should be used in presenting unrealistic expectations for all. Once again, this important viewpoint urges people to understand the presentation of autism across a spectrum of functioning, with unique strengths and challenges specific to each individual. Thus, this furthers the need to understand viewpoints from those with ASD to dispel misrepresentations of this population.

Facilitators for Workplace Success

Contrastingly, despite the many barriers to achieving success in the workplace, there are also several commonly noted facilitators. To identify possible areas to facilitate success, one study conducted by Nicholas et al., (2018) best described the complexities for the employment of individuals with ASD as the ecosystem approach. In other words, several factors are intertwined and all of them need to be considered to ensure successful outcomes. Due to the multi-factored complexities that dominate employment for individuals with ASD, it remains unclear the exact combination of supports and resources that would achieve the best outcomes (Nicholas et al., 2018). However, without ongoing support across a variety of areas within the broader context, individuals with ASD may experience long-term unemployment (Nicholas et al., 2018). There are a variety of factors that have the potential to facilitate the success for individuals with ASD in the workforce. These include personal supports, technological supports, physical supports, and social supports. Similar to the barriers section, each of these supports will be further discussed individually; however, when used together these supports have the ability to facilitate greater success and participation in the workplace for individuals with ASD.

Personal Supports. One way to facilitate success for individuals with ASD in the workplace is to consider their personal factors. It is crucial to remember that when finding employment for individuals with ASD, the employee themselves needs to be acknowledged as a central stakeholder and included throughout the entire process (Nicholas et al., 2018; Pfeiffer et al., 2017). These individuals oftentimes have the ability and desire to work, and their unique skill sets have the potential to act as facilitators to employment (Hensel, 2017; Khalifa et al., 2020; Muller et al., 2018; Nicholas et al., 2018). More specifically, several authors noted specific traits that many individuals with ASD might possess that serve them well within the workforce

environment. Khalifa et al., (2020) noted traits of honesty, efficiency, consistency, lack of interest in office drama, good visual perceptual skills, and concentration skills. There were several authors that found similar traits to be common: Reliability (Hensel, 2017; Johnson et al., 2020), low absenteeism (Hensel, 2017; Khalifa et al., 2020), attention to detail (Albright et al., 2020; Hensel, 2017; Johnson et al., 2020; Khalifa et al., 2020), adherence to routines (Albright et al., 2020; Hensel, 2017), and good memory skills (Hensel, 2017; Johnson et al., 2020; Khalifa et al., 2020). Johnson et al., (2020) also described trustworthiness and persistence as beneficial traits. Despite employers identifying these skills as important, they can oftentimes be overlooked for individuals with ASD. Therefore, a main component of the job search process should be focused on finding jobs that allow these skills to be emphasized and utilized to their fullest potential.

With the increased presence of technology in society today, products and technology can also serve as a support for people with ASD. For example, the use of an iPod Touch can be used as a personal digital assistant to provide task reminders, task lists, and behavioral self-management adaptations to ultimately increase independence and competence in tasks (Khalifa et al., 2020). Likewise, when possible, technology-related job tasks can sometimes be ideal for people with ASD because of their ability to recognize patterns, accurately perform detail oriented and repetitive tasks, and their ability to maintain focus (Johnson et al., 2020). This idea is further shown through the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 when youth with ASD were asked about their perceptions of strengths and weaknesses. They reported much higher confidence in the area of computers and significantly lower in areas of socialization. This further supports the claim that technology-related job tasks may be ideal for some individuals with ASD (Wehman et

al., 2014). For some individuals, limiting customer service tasks may also help to facilitate success (Khalifa et al., 2020).

Physical Supports. There are numerous environmental factors that can help create positive outcomes for people with ASD in the workforce. Physical changes to the workplace environment can enhance performance and completion of tasks (Khalifa et al., 2020; Nicholas et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2015). For example, environmental modifications, such as minimizing distractions from others through a quiet office space, can help to facilitate success (Hedley et al., 2018; Hensel, 2017; Khalifa et al., 2020). If it is not possible to make the physical environmental changes necessary to create a quiet work environment, noise canceling headphones are a simple alternative to help manage auditory stimulation (Hedley et al., 2018; Pfeiffer et al., 2017). By managing noise levels and interruptions in the physical workplace, people with ASD can work more effectively. However, it is also important to note that individuals with ASD should not be secluded in the workplace. Hedley et al. (2018) identified that physically locating the trainees with ASD close to other co-workers can help to facilitate social interactions and positively impact workplace experiences (Hedley et al., 2018). Small and organized desks with personal space can also help to facilitate success (Pfeiffer et al., 2017).

In addition, numerous studies have identified using appropriate lighting as a facilitator to workplace success for individuals with ASD due to their sensory needs (Hedley et al., 2018; Khalifa et al., 2020; Pfeiffer et al., 2017). Furthermore, wearing preferred clothes instead of a uniform can reduce unnecessary tactile stimulation, thus limiting a distractor and creating a positive impact on working (Pfeiffer et al., 2017).

In addition to the physical workspace, the use of physical aides to manage unstructured time can facilitate success (Khalifa et al., 2020). More specifically, the use of organizational

strategies such as, picture schedules, trackers, instruction sheets, labels, and checklists can improve work outcomes (Khalifa et al., 2020). In a study conducted by Muller et al., (2018), 64% of employers reported that having a schedule and/or checklist of tasks to be performed was beneficial for the participation of people with ASD in the workplace (p. 343).

In general, limiting the amount of unstructured time during the workday can also be beneficial (Nicholas et al., 2018). For example, a participant in a study conducted by Hedley et al., (2018) expressed that simple modifications, like providing a chart for employees to sign in and out for lunch at a set time, helped the trainees with ASD become better aware of the unspoken rules about the social event of lunch breaks (Hedley et al., 2018). These seemingly simple environmental problems oftentimes go unnoticed without advocacy efforts that share the unique experiences and needs of the ASD community.

Social Supports. Social support directed towards people with ASD can also help to facilitate success and bridge the social gap that people with ASD may experience. For example, family support has been shown to play a crucial role in employment outcomes for people with ASD. Involved families provide irreplaceable supports across multiple areas of employment including advocacy, finding a job, emotional support, recognition, problem-solving, and assistance navigating services (Nicholas et al., 2018).

Regarding the work environment itself, on-the-job training can increase success (Khalifa et al., 2020). Once hired, specific and direct communication about expectations regarding the workplace culture and productivity requirements can be extremely beneficial, as people with ASD typically have impairments with social communication. Task simplification and regularly scheduled check-ins from supervisors can also facilitate success (Khalifa et al., 2020; Scott et al., 2015).

Implementing a system of peer mentoring from a coworker can help create relationships and encourage a safe learning environment for the individual with ASD (Coleman & Adams, 2018; Nicholas et al., 2018; Tamburo et al., 2019). Worksite mentors can help foster relationships and mend the gap between limited job coaching. It can also facilitate long-term employment by allowing the individual with ASD to receive regular feedback and quickly problem solve when issues arise (Coleman & Adams, 2018). If possible, creating one person to act as a singular point of contact is beneficial. This helps ensure consistency and designates the responsibility for someone to take action, ensuring that individuals with disabilities' needs do not go unrecognized (Tamburo et al., 2019).

Increasing employers and coworker's awareness of ASD is an essential way to create positive experiences because it will impact how they interact with employees with ASD. For example, adapting communication styles so that coworkers and supervisors communicate directly and succinctly can help facilitate positive social interactions (Hedley et al, 2018; Nicholas et al., 2018). Likewise, encouraging written communication of important tasks can improve the clarity of directions. For example, supervisor communication of specific expectations and tasks with employees with ASD can be accomplished through text, email, and written note, rather than through casual, unscheduled conversations (Hensel, 2017; Khalifa et al., 2020). Furthermore, coworkers of interns with ASD in a study conducted by Hedley et al. (2018) identified changing their communication styles to be more mindful of sarcasm and literal interpretations. One participant shared that being sarcastic does not work because "...it's going to be taken literally", and "being very concise" is a better form of communication (Hedley et al., 2018, p. 534). If situations arise where supervisors have to explain the consequences of social

choices and/or the workplace culture, describing the situation in a logical cause and effect manner can be an effective approach (Hensel, 2017).

The workplace culture can also serve as a facilitator to workplace success. Specifically, an accepting workplace environment can greatly impact job satisfaction for people with ASD (Muller et al., 2018; Nicholas et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2018). Supervisors and coworkers who are understanding of individuals with ASD are crucial in contributing to the success of an individual with ASD in their workplace (Nicholas et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2018). More specifically, attitudes of respect, patience, and understanding are beneficial skills for a supervisor to possess, in order to be successful in working with individuals with ASD (Khalifa et al., 2020). In order to create this accepting workplace atmosphere, education for both employers and coworkers is essential (Albright et al., 2020; Khalifa et al., 2020; Muller et al., 2018). When both coworkers and employers exhibit the traits of open-mindedness, respect, engagement, and clear communication of job responsibilities, higher success rates for employees with ASD follow (Nicholas et al., 2018). Furthermore, “positive experiences between employers and people with disability” are essential to promote positive changes in the employment of people with ASD (Murfitt et al., 2018, p. 428).

It seems apparent that there are several facilitators that can positively impact the work experience for those with ASD; however, these facilitators do not always take precedence in the workplace environment. To initiate this perspective shift and provide individuals with ASD with the proper supports to maintain successful employment, it is crucial to hear their individual experiences with regard to what has worked for their unique set of needs in the workplace.

Perspective Shift

Pfeiffer et al., (2017) sought to determine factors for participation and satisfaction in work specifically with regard to environmental factors. Participants with ASD noted both positive and negative attitudes at their job which directly correlated to their overall satisfaction and performance. These individuals felt that when their employers and coworkers were aware of ASD, they were more understanding and accommodating, thus fostering a positive and productive work environment for that individual. Contrastingly, when there was a lack of understanding, the individual felt ostracized and unsupported in their work endeavors. These firsthand accounts suggest that targeting the understanding and willingness of employers to make accommodations can increase overall job satisfaction and performance (Pfeiffer et al., 2017). Supporting this, many of the adaptations mentioned by participants in this study were very cost effective and quick to be implemented, making them feasible options for many employers (Pfeiffer et al., 2017). This study provided insightful information into the environmental aspects of the work environment; however, further aspects of the overall work experience from the perspective of individuals with ASD still need to be identified. By increasing the understanding of the needs and experiences of the ASD community, employers' perceptions of the need for unrealistic and costly modifications can be changed.

Similarly, in a previously discussed study conducted by Muller et al., 75% of employers who hired Project SEARCH interns were “very satisfied”; 16% were “somewhat satisfied”; 7% were “neutral”; 2% were “somewhat dissatisfied”; and no employer was “very dissatisfied” with their interns with ASD (Muller et al., 2018, p. 343). This helps to demonstrate that once hired, many employers have positive experiences of employing individuals with disabilities.

Attitudes regarding individuals with disabilities in the workforce can also negatively impact an individual with ASD and their participation in the workplace. For example, many co-worker and employer beliefs about the ASD community improve when they have the opportunity to develop relationships with each other (Pfeiffer et al., 2017). Rashid et al. (2017) conducted a study from the viewpoint of employer specialists. These individuals felt that there is a need for an attitude shift regarding individuals with disabilities in the workforce. One participant said

How do you shift attitude about disability and what that means to society? Really, when it comes to the point that it's typical for someone with a disability to walk in and hand in a resume and whomever happens to be working at the counter at [workplace] they just say, 'oh sure, I'll take that resume and give it to my manager' in the exact same way [as any applicant without disability]. That would be incredible if we could have that giant societal shift in attitude. (Rashid et al., 2017, p. 3515)

Thus, a place to start in creating this shift is sharing successful workplace engagement experiences from firsthand experiences. More positive experiences of hiring individuals with disabilities needs to be shared so other employers can get rid of their own preconceived biases and see the potential in hiring these individuals (Rashid et al., 2017). For example, one incorrect assumption about the ASD population is that they have intellectual deficits. Some employers need exposure to understand that many individuals with ASD actually have average or above average intellectual capabilities (Coleman & Adams, 2018; Hensel, 2017; Kazukauskas, 2018).

Further, Nicholas et al., (2018) found that after employers participated in a training program and learned more about ASD, their preconceptions were dispelled. Consequently, the consideration of employing an individual with ASD was brought up, something that was never previously given thought to before (Nicholas et al., 2018). In the awareness training, discrediting

negative stereotypes cultivated an appreciation for these individuals and their potential skill set for the workplace. One employer's view completely changed stating that

I always thought that people with autism were very withdrawn and gave no eye contact and that kind of thing, and that's totally rubbish. Some of them can be the other way, very outgoing and way more sociable than you would anticipate. I found they were great. It was really rewarding. (Nicholas et al., 2018, p. 270)

This shift in perspective, combined with understanding the necessity and reasoning behind accommodations, is crucial towards advancing the opportunities for individuals with autism to be included in positive and successful employment.

Occupational Therapy and Employment

Occupational therapists are in a unique place to facilitate this shift in perspective and provide education to the community at large about the potential for these individuals to participate successfully in the workplace and in everyday life. The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) defines occupational therapy (OT) as, "the therapeutic use of everyday life occupations with persons, groups, or populations (i.e., clients) for the purpose of enhancing or enabling participation"(American Occupational Therapy Association, 2020, p. 1). Across all populations of individuals, the goal of OT is to utilize a process of evaluation, intervention, and outcomes, to help individuals achieve success and independence within their life. Further, "occupational therapy practitioners use their knowledge of the transactional relationship among the client, the client's engagement in valuable occupations, and the context to design occupation-based intervention plans" (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2020, p. 1). Therefore, this places occupational therapy practitioners in a unique position to facilitate success in the workforce for individuals with disabilities.

A literature review was conducted by Capo (2001) to more fully examine the role of OT in employment for individuals with ASD. Occupational therapists are trained in a way that proves extremely beneficial in assisting with the employment process. They are skillful in understanding the effects of motor, sensory, and cognitive impairments on function. Further, they seek to prevent problems before they arise, remediate necessary skills, and provide compensatory strategies to navigate the complexities of the work environment. More specifically, there are several roles an occupational therapist has in assisting individuals with finding and maintaining employment. These include pre-vocational/vocational assessments, functional capacity evaluations, job demands analysis, environmental adaptations, assistive technology implementation, vocational interest exploration, social skills training, arranging supports, and collaborating with other team members (Capo, 2001).

In addition, occupational therapists can help individuals with ASD discover their unique skill set. One way to do this is by using the *Canadian Occupational Performance Measure* (COPM). This can help individuals identify job readiness skills through an individualized approach for selecting and working towards goals. This measure is person centered and understands the individual's strengths relevant to employment (Nicholas et al., 2018).

The person environment fit is one of the frameworks that helps guide occupational therapy practice. It emphasizes that both personal and environmental factors are intertwined and have a reciprocal effect on one another. When viewed in relation to employment, there are many personal and environmental factors that mutually affect one another (Pfeiffer et al., 2018). When discussing possible places to intervene, it is crucial to consider the environment, oftentimes a factor that goes unnoticed. Unfortunately, too often for individuals with ASD, their symptoms

and personal attributes are targeted as a crucial area to change, rather than considering factors that are also equally important such as the environment (Pfeiffer et al., 2018).

Likewise, Coleman & Adams (2018) mentioned the benefit of having an occupational therapist evaluate the workplace for sensory components that may impede functioning. These sensory characteristics are oftentimes barriers to successful participation in the occupation of work for those with ASD (Coleman & Adams, 2018). It is also crucial to understand the variation of sensory processing difficulties between individuals. Some individuals may take longer or do not respond at all to sensory stimuli, which makes them have a high sensory threshold. Contrastingly, some individuals have a low sensory threshold in which the smallest amount of stimuli can be extremely overwhelming (Pfeiffer et al., 2018). These in turn, can have negative effects on one's overall functioning within a work environment. Without a basic understanding of how someone with ASD processes sensory stimuli, employers will be unequipped to support their unique sensory needs that can oftentimes be met through environmental modifications (Pfeiffer et al., 2018). Equipping individuals with ASD with the skills to advocate for themselves and their unique needs and giving the community a platform to share their experiences can cultivate an environment of understanding and inclusivity in the workplace.

An Individualized Approach

To understand all the components that relate to the employment of individuals with ASD, all stakeholders need to be involved. Several studies have examined the employer's viewpoints on hiring those with ASD (Albright, et al., 2020; Muller, et al., 2018; Scott, et al., 2018) but there is limited research and first-hand accounts of the job search and employment process for those with ASD.

Thus, when considering any intervention approach, it is essential to consider the perspectives of individuals with ASD. As noted by a participant in a discussion board for individuals with ASD, “the biggest problem with most programs designed to assist autistic children is, as far as I can tell, that they were designed by NTs [neurotypicals] and for NTs [neurotypicals]” (Brownlow, 2010, p. 252).

With regard to employment, it is evident that the extent of need for the ASD community greatly outweighs the availability of resources (Nicholas et al., 2018). Rashid et al. (2017) conducted a study that viewed the perspectives of employment specialists. The researchers noted that employers and coworkers more often saw the disability at the forefront, rather than a human being. An approach to move away from this and move towards understanding and seeing a person first, is one of the first necessary steps in cultivating an appropriate workplace environment (Rashid et al., 2017). To do so, individuals with ASD and their experiences need to be shared with society to initiate this shift in thinking.

Nicholas et al., (2015) conducted a literature review to examine the available literature regarding the vocational supports available for those with ASD. Future directions of research from this literature review were identified positing that, “vocational needs are likely to change over time given individual maturation, shifts in family life circumstances, career pathways, and other personal, family, and contextual influences” (Nicholas et al., 2015, p. 240). Thus, it is imperative to research these factors and their implications from the perspectives of those with ASD.

Baldwin & Costley (2016) conducted a large-scale study in Australia focusing on the lived experiences of females with ASD, with no co-occurring intellectual disability. This survey was distributed nation-wide and ultimately 82 women with high functioning ASD participated.

The survey included topics related to health, education, employment, and social and community activities, to gain a better understanding of a multitude of factors affecting their daily lives. With regard to employment, 62% of the women, not currently pursuing higher education, reported working a paid job. For perspective, the national employment rate in Australia for all women was 95% that same year (Baldwin & Costley, 2016, p. 489).

In this same study, the most common places of work were grouped into the following categories: community and personal service workers, clerical and administrative workers, professionals, and technicians and trade workers (Baldwin & Costley, 2016). More than 50% of these individuals noted their educational qualifications were above the necessary skills for their job (Baldwin & Costley, 2016, p. 489). Thematic analysis of their open-ended responses revealed the overwhelming feelings of not maximizing their full potential and their extent of their skill sets were either not recognized or not appreciated within their workplace (Baldwin & Costley, 2016). Despite these negative feelings, “many women in the study remained upbeat and ambitious with regard to their future plans, with plenty of aspirations to further study and new careers” (Baldwin & Costley, 2016, p. 490). These individuals, although defeated several times, are still motivated to overcome the many barriers set before them to become successful and contribute to society while utilizing their fullest potentials.

From the available literature, Australia seems to be further advanced than the United States with regard to research and inclusion efforts focused on better supporting those with ASD within society (Baldwin & Costley, 2016; Hedley et al., 2017; Scott et al., 2015; Scott et al., 2018). Due to vastly different social constructs, similar studies need to be conducted within the United States to gather pertinent information for individuals with ASD in this country.

Baldwin & Costley (2016) utilized a questionnaire approach which was helpful in uncovering a wide range of issues from a large population. It is necessary to continue these conversations in greater depth; if parity within the constructs of the workplace environment for those with ASD is a future possibility, better understanding of individual employment experiences is indispensable.

Problem Statement and Research Questions

Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) face disproportionately high levels of unemployment and underemployment (Khalifa et al., 2020). Autism Spectrum Disorder is a spectrum, meaning that individuals fall on a continuum and everyone presents differently (Kazukauskas, 2018). Likewise, the employment process is unique for every individual. There are facilitators and barriers to employment that have been identified that generally hold true (Khalifa et al., 2020; Muller, et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2018); however, because ASD presents as a spectrum each individual may have a different story. Several studies have examined the employer's viewpoints on hiring those with ASD (Albright, et al., 2020; Muller, et al., 2018; Scott, et al., 2018) but there is limited research and first-hand accounts of the job search and employment process for those with ASD. Giving the ASD community a voice and listening to their unique experiences can help raise awareness of their capabilities and provide valuable insight into a key stakeholder's perspective that has often been overlooked.

This study aims to gain a deeper understanding of the following questions: (1) What do the participants' stories reveal about the reality of employment for those with ASD in our society today? (2) How do individuals with ASD perceive their experience in the job search process? (3) What do individuals with ASD wish to share with employers and the community at large about their experience as an adult in the work environment? (4) From the perspective of an individual

with ASD, what are some of the perceived hardships and successes when trying to find and maintain a job? (5) What role can occupational therapists play in facilitating the employment of people with ASD in the workforce?

Methodology

Introduction

This research project was reviewed and approved by the Elizabethtown College Institutional Review Board (IRB) (Package 1698247-1). A holistic multiple-case study design was utilized to better understand the unique experiences of individuals with ASD regarding finding and maintaining employment. As defined by Yin, *case study* is defined as “an empirical inquiry that... investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (DePoy & Gitlin, 2011, p. 309). Case studies “investigate a single phenomenon in context” (DePoy & Gitlin, 2011, p. 310). A multiple-case design was utilized because every individual with ASD experiences employment uniquely (Yin, 2009). Multiple-case studies “enable the investigator to examine the same phenomenon across several different cases” (DePoy & Gitlin, 2011, p. 311). Since the process of employment is multi-factored and has several parts that are inextricably linked to one another, it is important to understand one’s personal experiences within a broader context.

Interviews were used as the source of evidence. As noted by Yin (2009), “one of the most important sources of case study information is the interview.” Typically, case study interviews are guided conversations; however, due to the needs of this population, more structured questions were used (Yin, 2009). There are two main strengths of interviewing as a means of data collection: Interviews are targeted, meaning they focus directly on the case study topics, and they are insightful, as they provide inferences and explanations (Yin, 2009). Weaknesses of

interviews include biases both in poorly articulated questions and response bias, inaccuracies in responses due to poor recall, and reflexivity (the interviewee gives what the interviewer wants to hear) (Yin, 2009). Focused interviews were conducted, as they were a one-time interview that followed a set of questions (Yin, 2009).

Participants

Five individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) were recruited for this study. Inclusion criteria was as followed: (1) have an ASD diagnosis, (2) be over the age of 21, (3) be able to verbally communicate, (4) be currently employed or have the desire to be employed, (5) be able to give informed verbal consent. Our primary recruitment method occurred through purposive sampling of a personal connection. Snowball sampling was then used to identify additional participants. Our secondary sampling technique consisted of sending a flyer out to a local organization that is involved with individuals with ASD to send out via email to potential participants. Through both sampling methods, interested participants contacted the researchers via email. Before the interview began, the participants were asked to reiterate the purpose of the study and provided informed verbal consent. Ultimately, four out of five participants were able to complete the interview in its entirety. Therefore, four participants are included within the analysis. Table 1 shows the demographics of the participants. All participants were from the Mid-Atlantic states. Participants were not compensated for participation in the study. Prior to data collection, IRB approval was granted to complete this research. To protect the identity of the participants, they have been deidentified and pseudonyms were utilized.

Table 1*Demographics*

	Participant 1 “Ava”	Participant 2 “Lexi”	Participant 3 “Jim”	Participant 4 “Jane”
Age	Early twenties	Thirties	Mid-twenties	Late twenties
Gender	Female	Female	Male	Female
Occupation	Paraprofessional in a support classroom for early elementary students with autism.	Multiple positions: -Full time behavior management coordinator -Part time direct support professional (for individuals with mental health needs and Autistic individuals, as well as a supervised apartment setting) -Part time respite caregiver for children.	Sorter at Goodwill	Cafeteria aide in a middle school
Job Satisfaction	Satisfied	Satisfied	Satisfied	Satisfied

Data Collection and Procedures

A one-time semi-structured interview over Zoom took place during February and March 2021. Interviews ranged from 32 minutes to 58 minutes in length. Prior to participating in the interview, the participants were given an outline of potential topics that would be discussed during the interview (Appendix A). Semi-structured interviews were broken up into three parts:

General information/ personal information, life before employment, and participating in work (Appendix B). Prior to beginning the final section, *participating in work*, participants were asked if they were satisfied or unsatisfied with work. The corresponding question set was used. Open ended questions were asked, and answers were probed with further prompts to uncover details. Interviews were recorded and audio recordings were transcribed verbatim through an online transcription program.

Information was stored on a password-protected personal computer that only the researchers had access to. The data was not anonymous, as there were voice recordings for analysis that can be linked to the individual. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of participants and keep the data confidential. At the completion of the research in the Spring of 2021, all information and audio recordings will be permanently deleted. Participants were informed that they did not have to answer a question if they did not feel comfortable doing so, and they had the right to stop participation at any time.

Data Analysis

Individual case studies were constructed through reviewing the transcriptions of the verbal interviews. Case studies aimed to provide a comprehensive story of the individual and their engagement in the occupation of work. Case studies provided a description of the individual and their general journey through living with ASD focusing on early childhood, milestones, high school, and pre-employment experiences. Furthermore, case studies focused on the participant's participation in work including the application process, specific job tasks, job satisfaction, and plans for the future. After the case studies were completed, additional information not represented in the cases was compiled into a chart. Following this, a cross-case synthesis was used to analyze the four cases and the chart. Overall patterns in the cases were examined, and

similarities and differences were identified (Yin, 2009). According to Yin, (2009), “an important caveat in conducting this kind of cross-case synthesis is that the examination [...] will rely strongly on argumentative interpretation, not numeric tallies” (160). Commonalities and differences were noted across participants' responses. Some commonalities and differences were between two participants while others were across three or four.

To limit biases, the same semi-structured interview guide with the same questions was used for all participants. Additionally, credibility was increased through interview techniques: The researchers provided clarification and reframing of questions based on the participant's needs (Krefting, 1991). Credibility was also increased through establishing the authority of the researchers, as the researchers have prior experience working with individuals with ASD (Krefting, 1991). Therefore, the researchers have a bias towards supporting individuals with ASD in employment. However, the individuals with ASD are the experts in their own stories, and the researchers sought to learn from them and represent their viewpoints. The collaboration of two researchers and four informants allowed for investigator triangulation (Curin & Fossey, 2007). Finally, peer examination was used through question checking of the semi-structured interview guide prior to utilizing it during the interviews (Krefting, 1991). Participants' stories were shared and accepted as their personal truth. The participants all came from a variety of backgrounds with different experiences, allowing for a wide representation across the spectrum of autism.

Results

The results are presented in a case-study format. Additional information not fully represented within the case study, is presented in Tables 2-6.

Case Study 1: “Ava”

Ava is a female in her early twenties who has autism spectrum disorder (ASD). She is a self-proclaimed motivational speaker and self-advocate. Ava’s parents first recognized something was different with Ava when she was one year old when they compared her behavior to her older sisters. Mainly, Ava was not as responsive compared to her sister at that age, nor was she making attempts at speaking. Her parents talked to her doctor and referred her to an audiologist, but the audiologist confirmed that her hearing was normal. Through discussing Ava’s behavior with family friends, Ava’s parents realized that a lot of Ava’s signs and symptoms were similar to their friend’s child who was diagnosed with ASD. This led Ava’s parents to seek out additional medical care, and Ava was formally diagnosed with ASD at the age of two.

Ava’s parents enrolled her in early intervention (EI) services, and she received services seven days a week. Ava shared that receiving EI services seven days a week is not a common practice anymore, but she was thankful that she was able to receive as much therapy as she did. Ava received Applied Behavior Analysis, Occupational Therapy, Speech Language Therapy, and Physical Therapy. She received this intensive therapy starting at the age of two until she “ran out of services.” This occurs when a child reaches the maximum amount of therapy time paid for by the state. Consequently, Ava’s family moved states in order for her to access more services. After her family moved, she began to receive similar services in her new state. Ava shared that in first grade she made “huge, tremendous progress”. At the age of six, Ava said her first word, progressed with her eye contact skills, and made progress with toilet training. She continued to receive school-based occupational therapy until third grade to work on handwriting. By the age of ten, she shared she was able to communicate with the correct tenses with more fluidity.

Ava continued to progress, and by the time she was in high school she was in all mainstream general education classes. She received some special education services as well as speech language therapy until senior year. Ava did not have any work experiences during high school; however, she started volunteering her freshman year of high school and continued volunteering with the same organization throughout her 4 years.

Ava's volunteering experiences led her to work with children, which she discovered she really enjoyed. Ava received more responsibilities at her volunteer site as time went on. When she was a junior, she volunteered in a before and after school care program for children in her town. She was also a peer mentor for high school students with disabilities. Ava's volunteer work helped prepare her for where she is today. She believes her volunteer experiences strengthened her organization and preparation skills and helped her discover her interests.

After high school, Ava attended a local community college while living at home. She obtained her Associates Degree, and she also started working for the same daycare she volunteered with in high school. During her time at community college, Ava had field experience with children in an elementary school. Ava shared, "with all the experiences combined, that led me to more of my interests which is working with students with autism". The teacher in Ava's fieldwork experience classroom wrote her a letter of recommendation and encouraged her to work with students with ASD. She shared that connections were key to her success, as without connections she would not have obtained her current job.

Ava applied for her current job as a paraprofessional, a student support aide, through the school district's website and filled out an online application. She uploaded a resume, references, and had to answer questions about her experiences. Ava was selected for an in-person interview,

which was the most difficult part for her. Ava shared her interview skills have improved, but it was something that she has had to practice a lot. Likewise, as she gained more experiences, interviews have become easier.

Ava has made tremendous progress from her childhood to now. She shared specifically, her verbal communication skills have greatly improved. When asked how ASD presents in her uniquely today, she shared that she is a very visual and hands-on person. In order to understand topics, she needs to be able to visualize them in her head. Ava is extremely satisfied with her current role as a paraprofessional in a self-contained autistic support classroom for students in early elementary. Ava works Monday through Friday for the length of a regular school day, which is 6.5 hours. Ava does not receive any modifications in her work environment, and she feels that is an inclusive environment where she feels supported. If Ava ever needs help, her classroom teacher and coworkers have always stepped in to help. Ava shared that if given the opportunity, she would not change anything about her job. Ava's typical school day is as followed: set up the classroom for the day, pick up the students off the buses, transition the students into one-on-one instruction, snack break, further direct instruction, an afternoon meeting with other paraprofessionals, assisting with group lessons, attending specials with the students, facilitating calming time for the students, and transitioning the students on the bus to go home for the day.

Employment has provided Ava with much more than a job she has to go to in order to earn wages. Ava shared that for her, "it's about giving back for all the years that [she] ha[s] been getting [her] supports, and now [she's] supporting students that are like [her]". She feels that she is in a unique position to help the students reach their fullest potential and to be as independent as possible. Ava thinks that her organizational and planning skills have helped her succeed in her

job. She likes to keep her workspace clear in order to help with organization. Planning skills are also necessary in her job since she has to plan her direct instruction time and what she is going to do with her students. Her creativity has also been beneficial, especially when adapting to online learning during the pandemic.

Ava has been successful in her position, evident by positive feedback from lead teachers, coworkers, parents, and her recent recognition as the Best Support Staff in the district. Although the district and her coworkers know about her ASD diagnosis now, initially Ava opted not to disclose this information. She shared:

So it wasn't like, it wasn't right away. And I think that was the right thing for me to do at that time. Because that they can just see me as a worker, and be able to, like define, like, from being Autistic and everything. (personal communication, February 15, 2021).

Her classroom and district are now aware of her diagnosis because a parent saw an interview and shared the information, and it spread through the school until it eventually reached the Superintendent. Ava shared that she was okay with others finding out about her ASD diagnosis, and that it has worked in her favor. She shared that it has helped with her relations with her student's parents because her story has shown that "there is a lot that their child can do".

Likewise, having ASD has positively impacted her work because she is able to answer questions from her coworkers about life with ASD. Ava explained that when she shares her experiences with coworkers, she tells them that everything she says will not be 100% applicable to every student because autism is such a spectrum that affects every individual differently. However, Ava is able to provide valuable insight because she too has gone through experiences like the students in her classroom. Her coworkers did not treat her differently after finding out about her ASD diagnosis, apart from asking questions to gain her insight.

Ava shared that her students have pushed her to be her best, and she recently returned to school to pursue her bachelor's degree in Psychology with a concentration in Applied Behavior Analysis. With her increased education, Ava plans to explore other settings aside from the school district to also work for students in their homes and other places. She thinks her bachelor's degree will open the door to more opportunities. Ava shared that she is leaving her current job soon due to her family circumstances out of her control, but if it were up to her, she would have stayed at her current position. She plans to find a similar position in her new home.

Case Study 2: "Lexi"

Lexi is an Autistic female in her thirties and a college graduate with a bachelor's degree in Social Work. She values identity-first language (Autistic individual rather than individual with autism). She holds multiple positions including a full-time behavior management coordinator, and a Direct Support Professional (DSP) in an Autistic group home, a mental health group home, and a supervised apartment setting. In addition, she works respite nights with autistic children with no consistent schedule.

As a child, she met all her milestones; however, as she aged her differences became more apparent. Lexi shared:

But once I got to, like, say, middle school, adolescence, I kind of experienced it differently than the other kids. Like, while they were pressured to fit in and be like one of the cool kids like that was always kind of like a moot point to me. Like, it never really mattered. So, I couldn't really wrap my head around that. (personal communication, February 16, 2021).

Despite her noticing some differences throughout her life, Lexi first considered the possibility of being Autistic in her late twenties. She began researching and found blogs of Autistic people, which really resonated with her. Lexi was diagnosed with Autism at age 31, and in doing so, she felt very validated: “It was very validating, and it just like the light bulb went off, and it's like, okay, there's a name to both the struggles and the strength I've experienced over my life.” Since Lexi received this diagnosis later in life, she never received any services.

When asked how Autism presents within herself, Lexi shared that she has a few favorite restricted interests including Sonic the Hedgehog and Androids. She experiences some sensory sensitivities but shared they are mild. Some sensory experiences she does not like, and she wants them kept “far, far away from [her]”. However, she also feels like she can never get enough of some tastes, smells, and textures. She described herself as a sensory seeker regarding visual and auditory stimulation, as she enjoys colorful and flashing lights, as well as loud bass. She explained that she has trouble reading between the lines and she takes things very literally, so oftentimes it can be hard for her to uncover hidden meanings and agendas. She also remembered as a child that she would become fixated on certain things: “I remember being nine and like my latest kick was asking everybody in passing with their shoe size was like it was just a kick that I was on. So yeah, just kind of interesting things like that.”

Throughout all of high school Lexi was in mainstream classes and she enjoyed her experience. During her senior year, she began working at McDonald's part-time. It was during this time that Lexi discovered her love for socializing and working with people. She shared:

I always knew I was social. But it was the customer interactions that really showed me like, I really liked this, like my favorite part of it was working on counter 'cuz [sic] I

would get to talk to the customers more and get to know the regulars and have conversations. (personal communication, February 16, 2021)

She continued working at McDonald's for four years. During college, Lexi started as a biology major, but later found her passion for social work and switched directions. Around this time, she began working as a Direct Support Professional (DSP). Lexi also volunteered during college at a community center where she tutored children, and at a head start preschool program, both of which she thoroughly enjoyed. Lexi described hands-on learning experiences as the most helpful part of preparing students for life after graduation, both in high school and college. She shared:

It was those things [volunteering, internships, and jobs] that prepared me the most I think, like I said, like you can sit in school all day and learn about something, but until you're out working in the field, [...] it's like apples and oranges. Like, there's nothing compared to actually being out in the field. (personal communication, February 16, 2021)

Lexi is very satisfied with her current jobs. For her DSP position, she started working in a total care house while in college, which she realized she was not interested in. She wanted a job that allowed for more socialization, thus she requested to transfer settings. They moved her to the supervised apartments, and she still works there a few times a month as a part-time job that she enjoys. More recently, Lexi started working as a full-time behavior management coordinator, and she works with individuals with developmental disabilities. She works Monday-Friday and has individuals from 10 different group homes on her caseload. Lexi's role is to ensure the staff are implementing the behavior plans, and to gain signed consent from residents for things such as medications, or other restrictions that have to be approved by the Behavioral Rights Committee. In addition to her full-time job, she works twice a week in an Autistic group home as a DSP, one

nightshift weekly in a mental health group home as a DSP, and occasionally she works respite care for families with autistic children.

The behavior management position and the DSP positions are through the same agency. She has worked in the behavior management position for about a year, and she has worked in the DSP position (first in total care and then the supervised apartments) for about 15 years.

Lexi found and applied for all her jobs independently. Most of the jobs required written applications and interviews, which Lexi feels went smoothly for her. Lexi noted:

During the interview, the only part [...] that I get stuck on are open ended questions. I'm very good with straight answers, [...] but [when] it's like, tell me about a time when that's when I'm just like, Okay, what do I say? But I mean, I've gotten better at that over time, too. But I just find that it's [...] easier to answer questions looking for a specific answer versus open-ended questions. (personal communication, February 16, 2021)

She also explained that having practice with interviews and gaining more experience with them helps it to become “second nature”.

Lexi feels that her entire skillset is being utilized within her current jobs. Her full-time job requires a bachelor's degree. Her part time jobs do not require as much education; however, she shares, “they're perfect. Because they're places where I can be myself, I can interact with other people. And they're perfect as supplemental jobs to the full time one.” Lexi believes one of her biggest skillsets is that she is able to develop good rapport easily with almost anyone. She explains, “I can work with any age, I can find one common interest, at least with each person I work with. And then I use that and then build a working relationship from there.”

Additionally, employment has provided Lexi with far more than just a paycheck. For her, it is about the community. She shared:

It definitely gives me a sense of purpose and sense of community. It's like I've always got somewhere to go where I have people around me that I can count on to just, yeah, to give me that sense of community like I've always got somewhere to spend quality time with people. (personal communication, February 16, 2021)

As an Autistic advocate, Lexi has chosen to disclose her autism diagnosis to all her employers. In her job at the mental health agency, she enjoys being very open and connecting with the residents:

So it's like, staff know, residents know. And it's, it's all good. Like, they like seeing that you're somebody who has a diagnosis who's helping [...] and who's working in the field. So, I think that that kind of peer relationship is very important, because it's like, who understands somebody better than somebody who's going through it themselves? (personal communication, February 16, 2021)

She feels appreciated for providing a unique perspective from her own experiences, and she often receives positive feedback about her ability to bring this insight to others.

On the contrary, at her job as a staff member for the apartments, she explained: They want you to be kind of hush hush about your own experiences. So, like I'm not like, out as an Autistic or somebody with a mental health diagnosis with the residents per se. As much as I would like to share that with them. Like because we're not supposed to, I just I can't really say anything. But my supervisor, my co-workers know, and they're very, like, they're very accepting of it. (personal communication, February 16, 2021)

Lexi feels very supported in her current jobs, and she does not have any special accommodations. She expressed, “I just feel I'm looked at as somebody who's competent, and who knows what they're doing”. She explained that having a supportive supervisor really makes

a positive difference. Although Lexi does not have any modifications within her workplace, she uses different strategies to help her be the most productive she can be:

Strategies I use... [I'm] very visual, I've got to have things in front of me so stickies, my phone, I plug everything into my Samsung, or my Google Calendar. If it weren't for that, I don't know what I would do." She also uses the outlook calendar, reminders, a whiteboard, and file organizers to keep things in front of her as she described herself as an "out of sight, out of mind kind of person. So, I need stuff to be right in front of me, or I'll say, forget it. (personal communication, February 16, 2021)

Lexi loves her current positions, and she plans to stay. She expressed:

As far as the future goes, I've always been a one day at a time kind of person. So, the way I feel is right now I'm extremely happy. If life in five years is anything like it is now, I'll be happy. (personal communication, February 16, 2021)

Lexi is living her life sharing her knowledge and expertise with others, and she is extremely satisfied in doing so.

Case Study 3: "Jim"

Jim is a male in his mid-twenties who has ASD and is employed as a sorter at a local Goodwill warehouse. Jim was diagnosed with ASD at when he was two, and he received therapy services throughout his childhood and school-age years. Jim remembered receiving speech therapy from the time he was in preschool until he started working. Jim received occupational therapy services in elementary school. Jim shared that he does not have any sensory processing difficulties, and he could not think of any repetitive or special interests.

Jim was in a life-skills class in high school and graduated from high school when he was 21. Jim was in a self-contained classroom, so he solely interacted with students in his life-skills class for all classes throughout the day. Jim also participated in job training through his school where he went to different places in the community to learn job skills. He went with a job trainer and occasionally with other students. In this program Jim had the opportunity to sample multiple job sites to determine a good fit. Some of the community places that Jim went include a laundromat, Gain (a site that sorts clothing and other things), and a boarding school where he cleaned. Jim went to the sites multiple times to build his job-readiness skills. Jim shared his favorite location was Gain because he was able to sort things which he enjoys. These work opportunities ultimately helped Jim obtain his current employment at Goodwill. In his last year of high school, he participated in a school to work program. During this time, Jim and his job trainer from his school went to Goodwill and Jim learned how to do his job as a sorter. Jim's experiences at the school to work program and the life-skills program prepared him well for his job as a sorter at Goodwill. After graduation, it was a smooth transition to working at Goodwill.

Currently, Jim works five days a week at Goodwill. On weekdays he works from 7am-1pm, and on Sunday he works from 10am-2pm. Jim is happy with his hours, and that he likes the morning shift. When Jim began working, he worked the evening shift and received less hours. However, after some time, Jim was able to obtain more hours and work the shift he prefers.

The first thing Jim does when he gets to work is clock in, and then he "starts [his] job". Jim mainly works in the back of the store in a warehouse-like setting where he sorts and recycles items. Some of the items he sorts include books, shoes, metal, and electronics. Sometimes Jim has to interact with customers if they ask him questions while he is rotating the bins in the store. However, Jim primarily spends his time in the back in the warehouse sorting, and other

employees typically rotate the bins. When asked about his strengths, Jim shared, “I’m good at sorting stuff” and “I’m good at dumping trash”. However, it is difficult for Jim to multi-task. He shared it is “hard to do two things at once”.

Jim’s favorite part of his job is sorting. Jim feels he knows what is expected for him at his job, and he has gotten into a routine. Jim shared they play music at work, which he enjoys listening to. Jim can concentrate throughout his work tasks, and he shared he mainly sorts by himself. Jim feels supported at work, and he expressed he knows to go to his manager when he has questions or concerns. Jim explained that his manager helped him when he got hurt at work and broke his elbow on a piece of metal. Consequently, he had to take time off from work. He shared that he missed going into work every day, but he did not express that he was bored while he was staying home.

Jim found his job through the school to work program at his high school. Jim applied to the job and had an interview. Jim shared he was a bit nervous for the interview, but he thought it went well. Currently, Jim’s mom acts as a facilitator to his engagement in work because she provides Jim with transportation.

When asked about a positive work story, Jim talked about a time he attended a work Christmas party. He shared he enjoyed eating there, hanging out with the people he works with, and participating in a gift exchange. Goodwill also had a Valentine’s Day get-together, which he enjoyed with a lot of his coworkers. Throughout the year, Jim enjoys the social events with his coworkers. Jim plans to continue working at Goodwill because he is happy at his job.

Case Study 4: “Jane”

Jane is a female with autism spectrum disorder in her late twenties. Jane shared she does not remember much about the process of being diagnosed. She currently works in her local school district in the middle school as a dishwasher, and she is satisfied with her current job.

During high school, Jane was in a life skills class and she graduated at the age of 21. In addition to her school programs, Jane volunteered at the library. She feels that high school prepared her well for getting a job upon graduation. During high school she took a class trip to a job fair through her local Intermediate Unit. Jane was appreciative of this experience, and she found it very helpful that her school provided this opportunity to attend with her classmates. During this job fair, she found her current job, and she has been working there for 7 years. After graduating, Jane took a summer off due to the middle school not being in session for the summer months. Thus, Jane attended a group twice a week to play games and socialize with her peers. The rest of the days she stayed at home prior to her job starting in August.

On a typical day, Jane arrives at work at 9 a.m. and finishes working at 1 p.m. She works Monday through Friday and is off on the weekends. She enjoys this schedule and is satisfied with the amount of time that she spends at work. At her job she enjoys sorting, filling, and emptying the dishwasher, and cleaning off the tables. When she has finished these tasks, she goes to help the other ladies with extra tasks such as putting food in bags. She then returns to the dish room. In addition to the actual job tasks, the thing Jane enjoys the most about her job is the sense of responsibility that she feels and the feeling that others are relying on her to get things done. Jane works with a couple other workers, and she shared they all get along well. Jane enjoys

the social aspect of her job, and she likes talking with her co-workers. Jane feels supported in her work environment and noted that she specifically feels that her boss is helpful.

Jane enjoys listening to music in the background when she is working. Jane mentioned that having things written out on a note is helpful in remembering what she has to do. One time a coworker wrote a note of the tasks that she needed to complete, and she found it helpful.

She feels that her skills of sorting and organization match the job appropriately, and she feels she is paid appropriately for her work. She organizes the plates and utensils on the shelves and in baskets. Her job also requires flexibility, as demonstrated by a story she shared when the dishwasher broke. Jane had to go and take on other roles for the day by helping put rolls into bags to create packages of food.

Jane's family plays an important role in helping her maintain a job. Her mom or stepdad drives her to and from work every day. She used to take a bus to work, but now she is dropped off by her family.

Jane also enjoys occasionally pet sitting for her aunt which she does a few times a year. Jane and her mom work together for this activity because there are many animals. Jane usually takes care of the cats and the fish, and her mom takes care of the other animals. Her responsibilities include cleaning the litter box, giving them water, and feeding them. She does this a few times a year and loves working with the animals.

When Jane was describing her work with the animals, her excitement and sense of fulfillment she felt from partaking in this activity was evident. In the future, Jane would love a more permanent position working with animals as this is something that she enjoys. However,

Jane is satisfied with her current employment situation and she plans to stay with this job in the near future.

Table 2

Preparation for Work

Participant 1 “Ava”	Participant 2 “Lexi”	Participant 3 “Jim”	Participant 4 “Jane”
<p>Volunteer Experiences:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Hometown’s volunteer group provided various community projects. -Volunteered with a talent show. -Volunteered at a before and after school care program. -Volunteered as a peer mentor in high school for students with disabilities. <p>Interest Development:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “So, I was gaining a lot of experiences working with [...] high school students and also [...] with elementary school kids [...] and 	<p>Volunteer Experiences:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Community center providing tutoring -Head Start preschool program <p>Job Experience: Working at McDonald’s during high school: “I always knew I was social. But it was the customer interactions that really showed me like, I really liked this, like my favorite part of it was working on counter ‘cuz [sic] I would get to talk to the customers more and get to know the regulars and have conversations.”</p> <p>“It was those things [volunteering, internships, and jobs] that prepared me the most I think, like I said, like you can sit in school all day and learn about something, but until you're out working in the field, [...] it's like apples and</p>	<p>High School Work-Readiness:</p> <p>Job sampling:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Laundromat -A site that sorts clothing and other items -Cleaning at a boarding school <p>High School Connections:</p> <p>Placed at Goodwill during his school-to-work program (last year of high school). This is now his current place of employment.</p>	<p>Volunteer Experiences:</p> <p>Library during high school</p> <p>High School Connections:</p> <p>Trip to job fair through the Intermediate Unit. Current job was found at this job fair.</p>

Participant 1 “Ava”	Participant 2 “Lexi”	Participant 3 “Jim”	Participant 4 “Jane”
everything started from there.”	oranges. Like, there's nothing compared to actually being out in the field.”		

Note. Preparation for work was identified as a commonality. Preparation for work is defined as meaningful activities that helped prepare the individual for engagement in work.

Table 3

Personal Benefits of Work

Participant 1 “Ava”	Participant 2 “Lexi”	Participant 3 “Jim”	Participant 4 “Jane”
<p>Sense of Giving Back: “For me, for working in a school district, especially in the classroom that I work in [...] it's about giving back for all the years that I have been getting my support, and now I'm supporting students that are like me. So, the big thing to me is to be able to teach them and help them reach their fullest potential and [help] everyone to be as independent as they can be.”</p>	<p>Sense of Purpose and Community: “It definitely gives me a sense of purpose and sense of community. It's like I've always got somewhere to go where I have people around me that I can count on to [...] give me that sense of community. I've always got somewhere to spend quality time with people.”</p> <p>Connecting with others: “So it's like, staff know, residents know. And it's, it's all good. Like, they like seeing that you're somebody who has a diagnosis who's helping and who's working in the field. So, I think</p>	<p>Sense of Fulfillment: “Something to do that’s enjoyable.”</p>	<p>Jane enjoys having a sense of responsibility and socializing with coworkers.</p>

Participant 1 “Ava”	Participant 2 “Lexi”	Participant 3 “Jim”	Participant 4 “Jane”
	<p>that that kind of peer relationship is very important, because it's like, who understands somebody better than somebody who's going through it themselves?”</p>		

Note. Participants were asked to describe the benefits from work, aside from their paycheck.

Table 4

Misconceptions

	Participant 1 “Ava”	Participant 2 “Lexi”
<p>Misconceptions About Autism (Generally)</p>	<p>Eye Contact: “Just because [...] someone is not directly looking at you, that doesn't mean that they're not listening or responding.”</p> <p>Communication: “Just because someone is nonverbal doesn't mean that they still can't do things like everybody else.”</p> <p>Generally: “These are some common misconceptions that [...] have been told in the community. And [...] it's</p>	<p>Eye Contact: “There are a lot of people who don't look people in the eye. But then again [...] I've never had trouble with eye contact.”</p> <p>Sociability: “One of the misconceptions [...] is that we all are not social people. And they couldn't be further from the truth. While there are plenty of Autistics who aren't social, there are just as many who are [...] I have a lot of friends on the spectrum. And they're all just as bubbly and as social as I am.”</p> <p>High vs. Low Functioning: “Functioning labels are harmful, because say somebody is labeled as high functioning, then people assume that they have no struggles, and they might set high expectations [for them]. And then if somebody is perceived as low</p>

	Participant 1 “Ava”	Participant 2 “Lexi”
	absolutely not true. There's more capability than what people think.”	functioning, they might see someone with [all of] these difficulties and then discount what their strengths are. So that's why [...] people are trying to do away with them.” Generally: “I'm trying to think of other misconceptions, because there's a lot of them.”
Misconceptions About Autism and Work	Lacking Potential: “The way that people do talk to an individual with autism [...] the employers have to remember that they are an employee, and that they can do anything like everybody else does.”	Sociability: “I think a lot of the social things [...] Some people might assume that because someone's Autistic, they might have trouble engaging with other employees with customers and whatnot. And like I said, that can be totally false. Like [...] I work with people, for example, I work in human services with other people with developmental disabilities and mental health diagnoses. So, I use my experiences to relate to others and to establish a rapport.” Lack of Empathy: “The misconception that Autistics don't have empathy, we have a lot of empathy. It's just the way we show it sometimes. So, like, I definitely care a lot about the people with whom I work, and I don't really find it difficult to show empathy. Other people might find difficulty showing it, but it doesn't mean it's not there.”

Note. Participants were asked to share common misconceptions about ASD generally, as well as misconceptions in regard to work.

Table 5:

Acceptable Work Consists of:

Participant 1 “Ava”	Participant 2 “Lexi”	Participant 3 “Jim”	Participant 4 “Jane”
<p>Matching Interests with Job: “See, from my perspective it is always [...] about [...] special interests, that's the key thing to be to help individuals with autism to get employment is through special interests. [...] It really doesn't matter about like, where, you know, what it is, it's just about pushing it. It's about pushing them to get to where they want to be.”</p> <p>Utilizing Potential: -Feels full potential is being utilized and is extremely satisfied with her job and what she has accomplished. -Her students have pushed her to go back to school to get her bachelor’s in psychology with a concentration in Applied Behavior Analysis. -“So, I feel like it's actually pushing me to do more than, you know, than what I'm doing now. Which is great because that's</p>	<p>Utilizing Full Potential: “I consider what I'm doing to be acceptable. Like, for example, the DSP positions only require a high school diploma and a driver's license, [...] and] I have more qualifications than that. But as supplemental jobs [...] they're perfect. But my full-time job, you need a Bachelor's. So, I feel that I'm using the degree I have.”</p> <p>Providing Enjoyment: “And then for the other jobs, like I said, while I have a bachelor's, much less high school diploma, for additional jobs, they're perfect. Because they're places where I can be myself, I can interact with other people. And [...],</p>	<p>Matching Skills with Job Tasks: When asked what makes a good job, Jim replied with “sorting”. Jim shared that he likes to sort, and he deems this acceptable work.</p>	<p>She finds her current job to be acceptable work for herself.</p>

Participant 1 “Ava”	Participant 2 “Lexi”	Participant 3 “Jim”	Participant 4 “Jane”
<p>why I feel like anything should do that.”</p> <p>- “[...] A couple months ago, I was awarded in my school district [the] best support staff [award]”.</p>	<p>they're perfect as supplemental jobs to the full time one.”</p>		

Table 6

Barriers to Work and How to Overcome Them:

Participant 1 “Ava”	Participant 2 “Lexi”	Participant 3 “Jim”
<p>Interviews: “The interview process was tough for me, because it's like, you have people asking questions that are very wordy.”</p> <p>“Personally for me, it was always the interview process, like I would get to that point where I get through that application process. And I get selected for an interview. And when it actually comes to the interview, it's like, you know, they're asking questions that are very wordy, and I have to learn to clarify it. Or it's that [...] I just had to explain more my own</p>	<p>Interviews: “A lot of times I think the interview process [is one of the biggest barriers]. I did fairly well with the interview process [...] But I know for some people, especially like a kid just out of high school, or just out of college, who might be interviewing for like the first or second time, just some of those skills.</p> <p>Proposed Solution- Interviews: “The biggest key to getting a job is getting through the interview process [...] it’s the biggest first step.”</p> <p>“The more interviews you have, the more practice you get, and the more second nature it becomes [...] Maybe like classes or [...] somebody that they can meet with to work on developing those skills.”</p> <p>Lacking Accommodations: “On the job,</p>	<p>Multitasking: “[It is] hard to have to do different things at once”</p>

Participant 1 “Ava”	Participant 2 “Lexi”	Participant 3 “Jim”
<p>experiences, which just comes with practice.”</p> <p>Proposed Solution- Interviews: “I’ve been learning over time [...] to communicate that I need more clarification on the question. And I think a lot of people can relate to that in terms of like, just asking for that clarification, because sometimes questions do sound very confusing, and wordy.”</p> <p>Unemployment: “Another thing [...] is to be able to get a job in general [...] because in [...] the autism population, that’s the highest growth with unemployment. So just to get those experiences in general, have been very tough for everybody.”</p>	<p>maybe just making sure that they have accommodations when needed.”</p> <p>Proposed Solution- Accommodations: “When I worked in [...] one job as a supported housing specialist [...] I asked for a whiteboard [and] I asked for a file organizer [...] I’m a very out of sight, out of mind kind of person. So, I need stuff to be right in front of me, or I’ll [...] forget it. So, stickies are my best friend. And so yeah, making sure that you have those accommodations, making sure like if somebody maybe does have difficulty with the socializing, just kind of being mindful of that, and kind of making them feel at ease that you, you can talk with us, we’re understanding, if there’s anything you need, like no reservations or anything like that.”</p>	

Analysis

Following data collection, similarities and differences were identified in participant responses. Categories were created to best represent the commonalities across participants’ experiences. These categories include preparation for work, personal benefits, disclosing their diagnosis, misconceptions, supports, barriers, success and satisfaction, and the role of occupational therapy.

Preparation for work

Across all 4 participant experiences, it was evident a multitude of prior experiences prepared each for their job. For Participants 3 and 4, their high school experiences set them up well for life after graduation. Participants 3 and 4 were both in a life skills program and attended high school until they were 21. Both Participants 3 and 4 had job experiences during their high school that helped prepare them for work. For example, Participant 3 had job sampling experiences at three different locations. Additionally, during his last year of high school in his school to work transition program, he was placed at a Goodwill store, which is now his current place of employment. Participant 4 attended a job fair through the Intermediate Unit at her school. Her current job working at a middle school was found through this job fair. In this way, the high school system acted as a crucial connecting piece between Participants 3 and 4 and their current jobs.

Participants 1 and 2 also described the importance of their high school experiences in preparing them for work. Through both volunteer and part time jobs, these individuals discovered their passions and began gaining experience with real-world job skills. Participant 1 shared, “so I was gaining a lot of experiences working with [...] high school students and also [...] with elementary school kids [...] and everything started from there.” Participant 1’s volunteer experiences helped her realize her interest in working with children and her passion for helping others. She now works in a classroom supporting individuals with ASD, and her volunteer connections helped her obtain her job.

Participant 2 shared her part-time job at a fast-food restaurant during high school helped to solidify her interests:

I always knew I was social. But it was the customer interactions that really showed me like, I really liked this, like my favorite part of it was working on counter ‘cuz [sic] I would get to talk to the customers more and get to know the regulars and have conversations. (personal communication, February 16, 2021)

Consequently, Participant 2 works in settings where she can be social. Her high school work experiences helped her realize her interests, and consequently she sought a job that matched her passions. Participant 2 also described the importance of hands-on learning experiences:

It was those things [volunteering, internships, and jobs] that prepared me the most I think, like I said, like you can sit in school all day and learn about something, but until you're out working in the field, [...] it's like apples and oranges. Like, there's nothing compared to actually being out in the field.” She recommended hands-on experiences for any individual and emphasized the importance of learning in a hands-on manner. (personal communication, February 16, 2021)

With regard to how each individual obtained their employment, two main directions were taken. Participants 1 and 2 had a mainstream high school experience, graduated after 4 years, continued their schooling through higher education, and found their jobs after obtaining a degree. Participant 1 has also recently decided to further her education and is going to college part-time to obtain her bachelor’s degree. Contrastingly, Participants 3 and 4 obtained their jobs through a different route. Both of them participated in a life skills program in high school, participated in job training during school, graduated at the age of 21 years old, and were connected with their places of current employment through their high school. Overall, despite different paths, all 4 participants had experiences in high school that prepared them well for obtaining a job upon life after graduation.

Personal Benefits of Work

Another commonality noted between all participants was that work provided them with far more than just a paycheck. However, although all responses noted similar benefits, across responses, there was a continuum of how they defined the personal benefits for themselves.

For example, Participant 3 shared that work is “something to do that’s enjoyable.”

Participant 4 shared that she enjoys having a sense of responsibility and socializing with coworkers. Participant 2 shared:

[Work] definitely gives me a sense of purpose and sense of community. It's like I've always got somewhere to go where I have people around me that I can count on to [...] give me that sense of community. I've always got somewhere to spend quality time with people. (personal communication, February 16, 2021)

The sense of community and purpose that come with her work provide Participant 2 a sense of fulfillment. Participant 1 shared:

For me, for working in a school district, especially in the classroom that I work in [...] it's about giving back for all the years that I have been getting my support, and now I'm supporting students that are like me. So the big thing to me is to be able to teach them and help them reach their fullest potential and [help] everyone to be as independent as they can be. (personal communication, February 15, 2021)

Participant 1 received services for many years, so the opportunity to give back and help others provides her with a sense of fulfillment and enjoyment. Participants 1 and 2 feel a sense of fulfillment from helping those who are in similar situations that they once were by connecting and forming relations with individuals with ASD. Participant 3 describes his fulfillment as enjoyment for himself, while Participant 1 feels fulfilled when she sees that she is helping others.

Across cases, all 4 participants spoke of the importance of the social connectedness that employment facilitates. Work provides a routine and an opportunity to build social connections with others. Despite differences in their jobs, all participants enjoyed the opportunity for socialization that the occupation of work provides.

Despite societal misconceptions implying this population does not want to work, all 4 participants expressed a desire to work. More specifically, Participant 3 shared an experience when he was out of work due to an injury, and he expressed that he missed going to work. This exemplifies the innate desire to be productive within human nature.

Disclosing Diagnoses

Another commonality was the decision to disclose or to withhold their diagnoses from their employer. The participants' decisions varied from participant to participant. Participant 3 completed a school to work program his last year of high school in his current place of employment. A job coach accompanied him to Goodwill, where he learned the skills necessary for his job. With that being said, his diagnosis would have been made known to his employer through his job coach. Similarly, Participant 4 found her job at a job fair through her local Intermediate Unit. As this connection was made through the school, the employer likely would have been aware of her diagnosis at the time of being hired.

Participant 2 chose to disclose her ASD diagnosis to her employers upfront. Interestingly, Participant 2 was the only participant who was not diagnosed with ASD in early childhood. She did not receive her diagnosis until later in life, and she is a strong supporter of identity first language. This may be because she found a sense of validation, self-identity, and comfort in her diagnosis of ASD. Participant 2 is very open about her diagnosis and disclosing her diagnosis has been helpful for building relationships. She shared:

So it's like, staff know, residents know. And it's, it's all good. Like, they like seeing that you're somebody who has a diagnosis who's helping and who's working in the field. So, I think that that kind of peer relationship is very important, because it's like, who understands somebody better than somebody who's going through it themselves?

(personal communication, February 16, 2021)

While it is true Participant 2 is open about her diagnosis, her employer at the apartments does not want her to disclose her diagnosis to the residents. She explained,

They want you to be kind of hush hush about your own experiences. So, like I'm not like, out as an Autistic or somebody with a mental health diagnosis with the residents per se. As much as I would like to share that with them. Like because we're not supposed to, I just I can't really say anything. But my supervisor, my co-workers know, and they're very, like, they're very accepting of it. (personal communication, February 16, 2021)

It is an interesting point that between jobs, the perception of a worker having a diagnosis is handled differently.

Despite being a self-proclaimed motivational speaker and self-advocate, Participant 1 chose not to initially disclose her diagnosis to her employer. She shared:

So it wasn't like, it wasn't right away. And I think that was the right thing for me to do at that time. Because that way they can just see me as a worker, and be able to, like define, like, from being autistic and everything. (personal communication, February 15, 2021)

However, Participant 1's classroom and district are now aware of her diagnosis because a parent saw an interview and shared the information. Participant 1 shared that she was okay with others finding out about her ASD diagnosis, and that it has worked in her favor. She has been able to connect with her student's parents more after her diagnosis was known because her story has

shown that “there is a lot that their child can do”. Likewise, disclosing her diagnosis has benefited her coworkers and classroom because her coworkers now ask Participant 1 questions about her experiences, and she is able to provide her insight.

Misconceptions

It is possible that Participant 1 did not want to disclose her diagnosis because of the misconceptions that have formed a stigma in the ASD community in general. For example, both Participant 1 and Participant 2 talked about the misconceptions surrounding eye contact. Participant 1 shared, “just because [...] someone is not directly looking at you, that doesn't mean that they're not listening or responding.” Likewise, Participant 2 shared “there are a lot of people who don't look people in the eye. But then again [...] I've never had trouble with eye contact.” In addition to eye contact, Participant 2 shared that individuals with ASD are empathetic even if they have a different way of showing it:

We have a lot of empathy. It's just the way we show it sometimes. So like, I definitely care a lot about the people with whom I work, and I don't really find it difficult to show empathy. Other people might find difficulty showing it, but it doesn't mean it's not there. (personal communication, February 16, 2021)

In addition, both Participant 1 and Participant 2 shared that common misconceptions revolve around communication. Participant 1 expressed that “just because someone is nonverbal doesn't mean that they still can't do things like everybody else.” Likewise, Participant 2 shared:

One of the misconceptions [...] is that we all are not social people. And they couldn't be further from the truth. While there are plenty of Autistics who aren't social, there are just as many who are [...] I have a lot of friends on the spectrum. And they're all just as bubbly and as social as I am. (personal communication, February 16, 2021)

Participant 1 shared “these are some common misconceptions that [...] have been told in the community. And [...] it's absolutely not true. There's more capability than what people think.”

These common misconceptions about the ASD community can cause people and employers to make preconceived judgments about the individual with ASD, which can negatively impact the individual. Participant 2 shared labels can be particularly harmful for individuals with ASD:

Functioning labels are harmful, because say somebody is labeled as high functioning, then people assume that they have no struggles, and they might set high expectations [for them]. And then if somebody is perceived as low functioning, they might see someone with [all of] these difficulties and then discount what their strengths are. (personal communication, February 16, 2021)

These misconceptions can lead individuals with ASD to delay disclosing their diagnosis because of fearing judgment. Thus, in turn, they may struggle without the proper supports within the workplace. Similarly, some employers may think individuals with ASD lack potential:

Participant 1 shared, “employers have to remember that they are an employee, and that they can do anything like everybody else does.” Employers may assume that individuals with ASD are not social, and therefore not consider them for jobs that are social in nature. Participant 2 expressed:

Some people might assume that because someone's Autistic, they might have trouble engaging with other employees with customers and whatnot. And like I said, that can be totally false. Like [...] I work with people, for example, I work in human services with other people with developmental disabilities and mental health diagnoses. So I use my

experiences to relate to others and to establish a rapport. (personal communication, February 16, 2021)

Participant's 2 story clearly demonstrates that autism is a spectrum, and that autism does not define what someone can and cannot do.

Workplace Supports

Another commonality noted was the difference between independent employment versus supported employment. Participants 1 and 2 described themselves as independent in the process of finding and maintaining employment while Participants 3 and 4 were supported in both finding and maintaining employment. Both Participants 3 and 4 were supported by their parents for maintaining their employment, as their parents drive them to and from work every day. Participants 3 and 4 were also supported in finding their occupations through their school system. Participant 3 found his current occupation through his school's school to work program, and his job coach supported his transition from school to work. Participant 4 was also supported in finding a job through her school at a job fair with her class at the local intermediate unit.

Participant 3 was initially supported in maintaining his job with the support of his job coach. All participants felt that they were supported by their employer and their coworkers. Participants 1 and 2 can advocate for themselves in their workplaces and feel supported. For example, Participant 1 shared "everybody is just so supportive and like, like, if I ever needed help, my classroom teacher, my coworkers, like always helped." Participant 1 does not require any modifications to her work schedule but noted her supportive work environment. Participant 2 currently does not need any additional modifications and/or supports and shared:

I find that right now I [do not have] any accommodations or anything, but I just feel supported, like I feel appreciated for the unique perspective I can give and for my skills, I just feel that I'm supported in that way. (personal communication, February 16, 2021)

However, Participant 2 was also able to advocate for herself when she recognized things that could better support her in employment. For instance, Participant 2 shared:

When I worked in [...] one job as a supported housing specialist [...] I asked for a whiteboard [and] I asked for a file organizer [...] I'm a very out of sight, out of mind kind of person. So I need stuff to be right in front of me, or I'll [...] forget it. (personal communication, February 16, 2021)

In general, Participant 2 noted the importance of giving accommodations to employees:

Making sure that you have those accommodations, making sure like if somebody maybe does have difficulty with the socializing, just kind of being mindful of that, and kind of making them feel at ease that you, you can talk with us, we're understanding, if there's anything you need, like no reservations or anything like that. (personal communication, February 16, 2021)

It is possible that participants 3 and 4 have some accommodations in their work environments; however, they were not shared during the interview. Their needs and areas for accommodation likely would have been communicated by their support staff that helped them transition into their current place of employment. Participants 3 and 4 likely have someone else who advocates for them, while Participants 1 and 2 are self-advocates.

Additionally, it is interesting that all the participants had a consistent schedule for their primary jobs that they were happy with, as this is not always the reality for the ASD community. Participant 3 shared that he initially did not always work the same shifts, but when he worked for

a longer period of time, he received a consistent schedule at his preferred time.

Barriers to Work

Barriers to working were also identified by different participants. The barriers to obtaining work described by participants were both their own barriers, and barriers generally for the community of people with ASD. Participant 1 shared about the Autism population generally:

Another thing [...] is to be able to get a job in general [...] because in [...] the autism population, that's the highest growth with unemployment. So just to get those experiences in general, have been very tough for everybody. (personal communication, February 15, 2021)

There are many factors that may be contributing to why individuals with ASD are not obtaining employment. For example, Participant 2 suggested the importance of the interview process and the barriers it creates: “The biggest key to getting a job is getting through the interview process [...] it’s the biggest first step.” Furthering this point, Participants 1 and 2 both described the interview process as being difficult for themselves and the ASD community as a whole.

Participant 1 shared, “the interview process was tough for me, because it's like, you have people asking questions that are very wordy.” However, Participant 1 also recommended a solution for overcoming this:

I've been learning over time [...] to communicate that I need more clarification on the question. And I think a lot of people can relate to that in terms of like, just asking for that clarification, because sometimes questions do sound very confusing, and wordy.

(personal communication, February 15, 2021)

Similarly, Participant 2 shared:

A lot of times I think the interview process [is one of the biggest barriers]. I did fairly well with the interview process [...] But I know for some people, especially like a kid just out of high school, or just out of college, who might be interviewing for like the first or second time, just some of those skills. (personal communication, February 16, 2021)

She further explained how practice is crucial: “The more interviews you have, the more practice you get, and the more second nature it becomes”. To work on these skills, she suggested “maybe like classes or [...] somebody that they can meet with to work on developing those skills.”

Similarly, both participants described that the more practice they had with interviews and the more they completed, the easier they became.

Success and Satisfaction

Although finding a job is an individualized process with unique parts for each person, there are similarities across this experience. One area to better assist in preparing those with ASD to enter the workforce would be to help them with interview skills. More specifically, targeting individuals with ASD who follow a mainstream high school path who may miss out on job readiness programs can help better prepare them for their futures.

A critical component of job satisfaction, as evident across all four of our cases, is a match between participants’ skill sets and their job demands. Participant 1 spoke to the importance of this:

See, from my perspective it is always [...] about [...] special interests, that's the key thing to be to help individuals with autism to get employment is through special interests. [...] It really doesn't matter about like, where, you know, what it is, it's just about pushing it. It's about pushing them to get to where they want to be. (personal communication, February 15, 2021)

Even though all participants had very different jobs, they all had self-perceived success within them. Participant 1 described how she feels successful in her job and further, her current job has encouraged her to go and pursue another degree. She shared “I feel like it's actually pushing me to do more than, you know, than what I'm doing now.” She also thrives on receiving external praise for her accomplishments: “[...] A couple months ago, I was awarded in my school district [the] best support staff [award]”. She is utilizing her interest of working with children that was developed through her volunteer work. Participant 2 enjoys socializing with others in all her jobs. Participant 3 shared that “sorting” makes an acceptable job for him. Participant 3 shared that it is hard for him to multi-task: “[It is] hard to have to do different things at once”. Therefore, this substantially limits the number of jobs he would find success in. His job fits his unique needs, and he finds success within it. Participant 4 is skilled in completing organizational and repetitive tasks. Participant 4 is satisfied with her job, but also noted she may prefer working in a job with animals in the future. Success, therefore, is determined by an individual’s self-perception of their satisfaction with their performance of their job. Rather than imposing an outsider's view of what is successful, it matters more that the individual themselves views what they are doing as important and contributory.

Therefore, self-perceived success in the workplace also leads to the discussion of what is acceptable work. All four participants deemed their work acceptable for themselves. Again, this is interesting as although an outsider's view may see one's work as unsatisfactory, it is crucial to consider the individual’s satisfaction of their own work and what is and is not acceptable.

Speaking on this, Participant 2 expressed:

I consider what I'm doing to be acceptable. Like, for example, the DSP positions only require a high school diploma and a driver's license, [... and] I have more qualifications

than that. But as supplemental jobs [...] they're perfect. But my full-time job, you need a Bachelor's. So, I feel that I'm using the degree I have. And then for the other jobs, like I said, while I have a bachelor's, much less high school diploma, for additional jobs, they're perfect. Because they're places where I can be myself, I can interact with other people. And [...], they're perfect as supplemental jobs to the full time one. (personal communication, February 16, 2021)

Her description of acceptable work inherently connects back to utilization of her full potential, within jobs that match her skill sets. Across all four cases, participants felt they were successful and well-matched to the tasks required of them.

Potential Role for Occupational Therapy

To begin determining the potential role for occupational therapy (OT) to facilitate workplace engagement, participants were asked about their previous experiences and familiarity with OT. Participant 2 did not receive her diagnosis until later in life, so she did not receive occupational therapy services. She was unaware of what occupational therapists could do, and therefore did not have any ideas of how occupational therapy could help with work related challenges for individuals with ASD. Participants 3 and 4 both received occupational therapy services, but they did not remember what they did and did not have any suggestions for what occupational therapists could do. Participant 1 received occupational therapy services until she was in third grade, and she mainly worked on handwriting. With this being said, Participant 1 shared that “occupational therapists could help [...] when it comes to [...], assisting with [...], handwriting when it comes to practice for the interview, practice handwriting.” Aside from helping with handwriting, Participant 1 was unsure of any other way that occupational therapy could assist in the process of finding and obtaining employment.

The commonality of participants not being able to correctly identify the role of an occupational therapist emerged across all four cases. If these participants who could benefit from occupational therapy services are unaware of the potential benefits OT could have, or the availability of it for them, these services will never be accessed. Since occupational therapy practitioners are a common part of the intervention team for individuals with ASD throughout their school experiences, this should continue through post-graduation as well. Participation in life's activities does not stop after graduating school. Some would even argue, it is actually just beginning. Therefore, occupational therapy could be utilized more in helping individuals with ASD determine a good match in their skills and interests and the job task, as well as implementing modifications in the work environment.

Discussion

Although the common misconception of occupational therapists helping people to find jobs is not entirely true, there can be a unique role for them within this area of occupation. The Occupational Therapy Practice Framework IV identifies subcategories of how OT can assist throughout the entire work process. Included in this are employment interests and pursuits, employment seeking and acquisition, job performance and maintenance, retirement preparation and adjustment, volunteer exploration, and volunteer participation (AOTA, 2020). Occupational therapists have a unique role in assisting individuals to engage in the occupation of work. Through analyzing the contexts of both personal and environmental factors, combined with client factors of one's values, there are multiple areas to intervene. Occupational therapists help individuals engage more fully in their lives by addressing both performance patterns and performance skills. Performance patterns consist of habits, routines, roles, and rituals, whereas

performance skills include all the motor, process, and social interaction skills needed to complete a task (AOTA, 2020).

The desired outcomes of occupational therapy services are wide-ranging. Overall, they can include occupational performance, prevention, health and wellness, quality of life, participation, role competence, well-being, and occupational justice (AOTA, 2020). Evidently, almost all these outcomes can be directly tied to engagement in the occupation of work. Increased occupational performance is one desired outcome. Occupational performance is a broad term defined as the “act of doing and accomplishing a selected action (performance skill), activity, or occupation that results from the dynamic transaction among the client, the context, and the activity” (AOTA, 2020, p. 65). Therefore, occupational therapists can work with individuals with ASD to improve individuals’ skills and their patterns so that they can engage in the meaningful occupation of work (AOTA, 2020).

To facilitate improved overall occupational performance, several other outcomes can be addressed. Obtaining and maintaining a job helps to prevent negative health effects and decreased self-esteem that is often correlated with not working. This, in turn, facilitates improved well-being and quality of life. Participating in a job allows one to feel a sense of contribution to society. Once an individual obtains a job, it is crucial to ensure role-competence as well. Occupational therapists can help to ensure competency of workers with disabilities. Through educating employers and co-workers, advocating for one’s needs, adapting the environment, and implementing strategies, OT can help individuals succeed within and maintain their employment. Lastly, in this way, OT has the potential to promote and ensure occupational justice, or the idea that all individuals should have the possibility to meet their full potential through participating in life’s activities.

Considering the benefits of occupational therapy and the profession's ability to improve participation in work, one could argue that occupational therapists should have a greater role in helping individuals with ASD both in finding and maintaining meaningful employment. However, all four individuals in the study did not know the extent to which occupational therapists could help in engagement in work. Advocacy is an essential step. If individuals and employers do not know the supports that occupational therapy could provide, occupational therapists cannot work with these individuals. Therefore, an increase in advocacy efforts and beginning to connect these individuals with the resources they need, is an essential first step in promoting and providing services to them.

Throughout our case analysis, several different commonalities and differences emerged between the cases. However, not all of these are new: A large amount of our findings are consistent with the literature. The following will address the research questions proposed in the study.

The participants' stories reveal that employment varies for every individual with ASD. Just like autism presents as a spectrum, work experiences are also on a continuum. All the participants in the case studies were satisfied with their employment; however, that is often not the reality. As noted in the literature, an accepting workplace environment can greatly impact job satisfaction for people with ASD (Muller et al., 2018; Nicholas et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2018). All participants described their coworkers and workplace as accepting, which likely contributed to why they are satisfied.

As described by Valentini et al., 2018, one factor shown to be helpful in obtaining employment after graduation is the integration of community-based transition services and job sampling during the school years. Participants 1 and 2 were in mainstream high school classes

and therefore did not have these experiences during school, yet they both describe themselves as successful and satisfied in their work. On the other hand, Participants 3 and 4 were in a life skills program and participated in job-readiness transition programs to help with the transition from school to work. Both participants found their current occupation through their school programs, and there was a relatively seamless transition. Even though there is a large amount of variability with transition programs between schools (Johnson et al., 2020; Wehman et al., 2014), and some transition services do not start early enough to yield the most successful employment results (Johnson et al., 2020), the transition programs of both Participants 3 and 4 seemed to meet their needs and helped them obtain positive outcomes.

Khalifa et al., (2020) shared when people with ASD are employed, they are often underemployed and overeducated in their qualifications. However, the participants in the study were satisfied with their level of employment and their education matched the qualifications of the job. It is likely that due to the recent neurodiversity movement, more attention is being brought to the importance of employing individuals who match the appropriate qualifications and consequently, more positive outcomes are occurring.

Additionally, as Coleman & Adams (2018) identified, the interview process is oftentimes challenging for people with ASD. Participants 1 and 2 described their experiences which confirmed this reality, and Participant 3 described himself as nervous throughout the interviews.

The participants' stories also reveal that successful employment is possible for individuals with ASD. Even though the participant's stories and engagement in employment varied, they were all satisfied with their own employment experience. Related to this, the participants in this study revealed interesting information about their experiences with the job search process. Some individuals with ASD are independent throughout the entire job search process from locating a

job to apply to, ensuring they have the necessary skills, applying to it, accepting the job, and showing up to work every day. Contrastingly, others might need help throughout the entire process of finding and maintaining a job. Similarly, although not represented by a participant in this study, it is also plausible to hypothesize that other individuals need help with only some parts of the employment process, while they are independent with other parts. The individuals who were independent in the process valued their own independence, while the individuals with supports to their employment were appreciative of them. Since those who are independent valued the importance of matching skill sets with job tasks, it is likely they perceive their role of being the essential stakeholder one of utmost importance. They know themselves more than anyone and would likely argue that although supports can be helpful for some, you also can not lose sight of what matters to the individual. Since neither of these individuals experienced a job sampling program within their high schools, it would be interesting to see what they think about random job placements.

Additionally, as mentioned in the literature, many people with ASD have significant untapped potential and are historically underappreciated (Wehman et al., 2014). Participant 1 shared a similar perspective that “there’s more capability than what people think” and “employers have to remember that they are an employee, and they can do anything like everybody else does”. In addition, Albright et. al. (2020) found that employers often look at soft skills while hiring. The participants in the study shared a unique perspective regarding eye contact and empathy, which can help dispel the misconceptions that serve as a barrier to individuals with ASD. Participant 2 sought to dispel this misconception by sharing her own experience. Regarding empathy Participant 2 shared:

We have a lot of empathy. It's just the way we show it sometimes. [...] I definitely care a

lot about the people with whom I work, and I don't really find it difficult to show empathy. Other people might find difficulty showing it, but it doesn't mean it's not there.

(personal communication, February 16, 2021)

Regarding the soft skill of eye contact, Participant 2 shared: “Just because someone is not directly looking at you, that doesn't mean that they're not listening or responding” and “there are a lot of people who don't look people in the eye. But then again [...] I've never had trouble with eye contact.” Participant 2's experiences further the understanding that every individual experiences ASD differently. Grouping individuals into categories based on preconceived notions is inappropriate and creates negative outcomes for both individuals and groups of people.

Furthermore, Albright et al. (2020) noted that cognitive inflexibility can pose as a barrier to engagement in employment because many jobs today require flexibility to balance multiple responsibilities. Participant 3 shared a similar experience, as he expressed that multitasking is challenging for him. Additionally, even though many studies reported that social interaction skills and the unwritten social rules of a workplace often serve as barriers for people with ASD, all participants noted that they enjoyed the social aspect of their jobs and felt supported by their coworkers.

Limitations

As noted by DePoy and Gitlin (2011), “a major concern in case study research for studies relying on experimental-type techniques is ‘generalizability’. There is a limitation to the external validity of a case study” (p. 314). One limitation of this study is that the external validity was compromised, as these results are not generalizable to all adults with ASD. There was also a small sample size of only four participants. More participants would help to increase the chances of data saturation. Another limitation was the time constraint, as there was only time for one

interview to occur with each participant. Additionally, although transcripts were recorded and transcribed verbatim, member checking did not occur. Another limitation of the study is that the researchers are novice, and this became evident within the interview techniques. In situations when a participant did not understand the question, more probing questions were asked.

Therefore, it is possible the information received was not as accurate and authentic as it could have been, since sometimes two options were given. However, a strength of the researchers is that they are familiar with this population and were able to problem solve in order to adapt questions and interactions to fit the needs of the participants.

Additionally, since participants were selected purposively for this study, the researchers knew two of the participants personally. However, to account for this, the researcher without a personal connection was the one to complete the interview and ask questions. Both researchers were present in all interviews. Furthermore, although possibly both a strength and a limitation, the participants' experiences and functioning were wide-ranging. Although this allowed the researchers to present a broad array of information, it might be better to compare and contrast individuals who both meet the same criteria using a standardized measure. This would assist in displaying the results as accurately as possible, and not grouping responses into categories they do not fully fit into. As previously noted, the researchers have a bias towards supporting and including individuals with ASD in employment. However, this bias was limited through the use of a semi-structured interview guide, the analysis of a verbatim transcript, and investigator triangulation.

Furthermore, a limitation during the literature review was the specific focus on transition programs and special education in high school. However, a large component was missed in the literature review by not considering research studies focused on the transition from high school

to college and college to employment. This is significant because half of the participants in this study continued to post-secondary education, which was not reflected in the literature review.

Areas of Future Research

Several areas for future research are possible for furthering the information in this study. First and foremost, more research needs to be conducted with the population of adults with ASD in general. In fact, according to Sung et al. (2018), “only 1% of all autism research funding supports investigation of topics related to adulthood and aging.” Just as these adults experience a drop off in services when they reach twenty-one years old, there is also a paucity in research surrounding information and best practices for adults with autism. If occupational justice and integration into our society is going to be a reality for these individuals, more research needs to be done to make this a possibility. Moreover, a continual increase in advocacy efforts for this group of individuals highlighting their capabilities is necessary to initiate a shift in societal thinking. Through research centered on both individual and collective experiences, first-hand accounts can be understood and disseminated to assist in shifting from a society of acceptance to one of appreciation.

Additionally, our research covered a baseline of information from a one-time interview. To understand more long-term experiences of these individuals, a longitudinal study needs to be completed. It would be beneficial to follow these adults throughout their work experiences for both those who find employment immediately after high school and those who attend college. It would be interesting to compare the two groups to determine if there are differences in the needed services and experiences.

It would also be helpful to find out more specifically what these individuals need help with; however, the research should not stop there. Following the information received from their experiences needs to come practical solutions to the different topics addressed. For example, interviews are a commonly noted barrier for these individuals with ASD to obtaining a job. Therefore, turning this into a standardized intervention that can be implemented with a wide variety of people, can help to begin to overcome these challenges. Furthermore, researching the outcomes and reliability of such an intervention would be helpful in both refining and improving it. Lastly, this study focused on solely individual's with ASD and their perspectives. However, to broaden the perspective and gain the fullest understanding possible, it is crucial to consider all stakeholders. A potential problem that would arise with this is contradicting information being shared from different perspectives. Thus, the researcher would be unable to conclude how to most accurately represent the data found.

Conclusion

In conclusion, employment is a multifaceted process that is unique for every individual with ASD. Engagement in meaningful work can provide an individual with a sense of purpose, fulfilment, and a community. In our society today, occupational justice in employment is not a reality for many individuals with ASD. However, the possibility exists, as evident by the participant's experiences in this study. Although there are some things that serve as barriers to individuals with ASD in their engagement in work, ultimately, ASD is a spectrum, and everyone experiences employment uniquely. It is crucial to match one's interests and skills to the job demand, as well as to consider how the individual defines acceptable employment. All in all, individuals with autism are capable, and often want to work. An accepting societal attitude facilitates workplaces success and satisfaction.

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Appendix A

Topical Outline for Participants

General Personal Information/ASD

- Personal experience with ASD (diagnosis, services received (OT specific), family support)
- Misconceptions about ASD generally and in the workforce
 - Barriers to working.

Life Before Employment

- High school experience (classes, work)
- Steps after graduation/Transitioning

Participating in Work

- Application process
- Employment status
- Responsibilities of workplace
- Stories of work experience (positive and negative)
- Workplace supports & barriers.
- Future plans related to employment.

Appendix B

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

All participants were asked question groups 1 & 2. Depending on current employment status, the participants will then be asked EITHER question group 3A, 3B, or 3C.

- **1. General Personal Information/ ASD**

- We understand that there is currently a big push to move away from person-first language (individual with autism vs. autistic individual). We respect each individual's preference and would like to know if you prefer one over the other.
- Age
- We understand that each individual with autism is unique and has different experiences. In order for us to better understand your experience, would you be willing to share with us the process of being diagnosed (i.e., how old were you? What led you to seek out a diagnosis?).
- Tell us what it is like to live with autism? (i.e., were you always able to communicate, what supports, and services have you received, of these, what services have you found most and least helpful?)
 - Have you received occupational therapy (OT) services?
 - If so, do you think an OT can assist in the process of work (finding, maintaining, etc.)?
 - If yes, please explain. If no, no further questioning will occur.
- Please tell us some of the way's autism presents itself for you uniquely. (sensory processing, repetitive interests, social skills, communication)
- Please tell us some common misconceptions about Autism generally.
- Please tell us some common misconceptions about individuals with Autism and working?
- What do you think are some of the biggest barriers for individuals with autism to work? How would you recommend overcoming these barriers?

- What do you think are some unique skills that you possess that would help you succeed in the workforce?
- **2. Life before employment**
 - HS experience (classes, life skills program, transition programs, involvement in school. Our goal is to understand what your high school experience was like, and if it prepared you for working after graduation).
 - Please tell us about your class structure in high school. Were you in a specialized program, integrated classes, a mixture, etc.?
 - Did you have any work experiences during the school day? Or a job after school?
 - What experiences did you have in high school that you felt prepared you well for life after graduation?
 - Now that you have graduated, is there anything in high school that you think would have been helpful to make the transition from school to life after graduation easier?
 - After graduation, what were your next steps? (higher education, job, day program, volunteering?)

3. Participating in work (Our goal is to learn your story. We want to learn about where you are working (or want to), what you like about your job, if you feel supported, and what working means to you).

Are you satisfied with your current job?

- **A. Participants who are satisfied in employment:**

- Where are you currently working? Can you describe your typical day at your job?
- How did you find your job?
- Please tell us about the application process. (written application, interviews, etc.)
 - What did you find hard with this process?
 - What did you feel went well in this process?
- How often do you work? Do you have a consistent work schedule that you are happy with?
- Does work provide you anything other than the paycheck?
 - E.g., Do you find that working has helped give you an increased sense of purpose? Sense of community?
- Have you told your employer about your diagnosis of ASD? Please explain your reasoning.
- Overall, do you feel supported in your work environment?
 - How does your employer support you?
 - Do you feel that your workplace is inclusive of individuals with disabilities?
 - Please share a story of a coworker being supportive or unsupportive? If you can think of an example of both, please share both.
 - Is there anyone in particular that has helped you in the process of finding and maintaining a job?

- Are there any current modifications or strategies you use in the workplace? If so, can you describe them (what are they, do they help?)
 - Is there anything else that you think would be helpful for you?
- If you could change something about your job, what would you change?
- We understand that oftentimes for individuals with ASD, they are either underemployed or overqualified for their jobs.
 - What do you consider to be acceptable work?
 - Do you feel that your entire potential is being utilized in your current job?
 - If you are willing to share, do you feel that your salary is appropriate for your job?
- What are your future plans related to employment?
 - How long do you see yourself staying at your current job?
 - Is there anywhere else you would like to work?
- Please share a favorite positive work story/memory?
- If you have one, can you share a story where you feel like having autism positively or negatively impacted a work experience? If you can, please share both.
- Is there anything else you would like to share about your work experiences?
- **Participants who are unsatisfied in employment:**

- Are you currently working anywhere? Where?
 - If yes, refer to question list B; If no, refer to question list C
- **Question List B (unsatisfied but working):**
 - How did you find your job? Can you tell us about the application process? (written application, interviews, etc.)
 - What did you find hard with this process?
 - What did you feel went well in this process?
 - Can you describe your typical day at your job? What do your responsibilities look like?
 - How often do you work? Do you have a consistent work schedule that you are happy with?
 - Have you told your employer about your diagnosis of ASD? Please explain your reasoning.
 - Overall, do you feel supported in your work environment?
 - How does your employer support you?
 - Do you feel that your workplace is inclusive of individuals with disabilities?
 - Can you share a story of a coworker being supportive or unsupportive? If you can think of an example of both, please share both.
 - Is there anyone in particular that has helped you in the process of finding and maintaining a job?

- Are there any current modifications or strategies you use in the workplace? If so, can you describe them (what are they, do they help?)
 - Is there anything else that you think would be helpful for you?
- We understand that oftentimes for individuals with ASD, they are either underemployed or overqualified for their jobs.
 - What do you consider to be acceptable work?
 - Do you feel that your entire potential is being utilized?
 - If you are willing to share, do you feel that your salary is appropriate for your job?
- Can you describe why you are unsatisfied with your job? Is there anything about your job that you don't like?
 - If you could change something, what do you think would make you like the job more?
- What are your future plans related to employment?
 - How long do you see yourself staying at your current job?
 - Is there anywhere else you would like to work?
- Does work provide you anything other than the paycheck?
 - E.g., Do you find that working has helped give you an increased sense of purpose? Sense of community?
 - If this is not applicable to your current job, do you think this would be a possibility in another job?

- Can you share a favorite positive work story/memory?
- If you have one, can you share a story where you feel like having autism positively or negatively impacted a work experience? If you have one for both, please share both.
- Is there anything else you would like to share about your work experiences?
- **Question List C (unsatisfied; unemployed):**
 - Can you describe your typical day for us? Do you volunteer anywhere? Attend any day programs? If this is different because of COVID-19, please share your pre-COVID-19 experiences.
 - Have you been employed in the past? If so, can you share the places you have worked?
 - Why did you stop?
 - Did you feel supported in your job?
 - Did you disclose that you have autism? Why or why not?
 - Can you describe an experience with your coworker (both positive and negative if you have them)?
 - Did you feel supported by your boss? Were they willing to work with you?
 - What do you think stands in your way of having a job?
 - If you were working, can you think of any modifications or supports that would help you succeed?

- With regard to the job search process, what do you find difficult?
(finding one to apply for, interviews, written application)
- Given that we are in a pandemic this answer may be different, but what are you actively doing to try to get a job?
 - How do you search for jobs? (online, personal connections, word of mouth)
 - Who are your biggest supporters in trying to help you find a job?
- What would working mean for you personally? Why do you want to work?
- Is there anything else you would like to share?