

## Empowering Autistic Academics

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**Standfirst: Drawing on her personal experience as an autistic scientist-practitioner, Eloise Stark explores how we can empower neurodivergent populations in academia.**

The barriers that autistic people face in employment are numerous. According to a recent Office for National Statistics report, autistic people in the UK are among the least likely to be in work than any other 'disabled' group, with just 29% of autistic people in employment.

The disability employment gap is highly complex, and it would be foolish to attempt to suggest how to fix it. Instead, I hope to incite curiosity in those working within academia as to how they might become aware of the challenges for autistic colleagues, and how to show compassionate engagement.

As an autistic academic educated to doctoral level and now in training to be a Clinical Psychologist in the NHS, I have done well, at least by neurotypical standards of success. These academic successes have often been facilitated by understanding, compassion, and adaptations, that have enabled me to feel and be authentic, produce good work, and ultimately enjoy the process. Yet sometimes success comes despite a distinct lack of understanding, compassion, and adaptations. I believe that we can do better.

True to my brain's neurodivergent instinct to systematise, I discuss four steps towards supporting autistic colleagues in academia. In conjunction with this systematic process, my robust neurodivergent capacity for empathy invites the reader to hold the person at the heart of this process.

The first step in making meaningful change is undoubtedly asking ourselves the question of how we can best empower autistic people in academia, while developing awareness that the playing field is not level.

Starting from a point of 'conscious incompetence', or the awareness of what you do not know or comprehend, enables you to begin to ask questions, show curiosity, and learn, free from harmful sociocultural stereotypes of autism and difference. Do not focus on an individual characteristic such as neurodivergence exclusively, but take a more idiosyncratic and intersectional approach that accounts for other visible and invisible differences (such as race, gender, and sexuality) in combination with a neurodivergent profile. Be aware of contextual issues such as minority stress – how social disadvantage and marginalisation result in an increased burden, which can cause mental and physical health disparities.

The next step is to engage with your colleague – build a relationship that feels safe for your curiosity and their authenticity; collaborate with them to gain understanding, and listen – really listen. Explore what their experience as an individual is like in academia. Areas that may be worth exploring include how the environment is suited to their sensory profile (consider bright lights, noise, temperature) and what moderates their sensory hyper- or hypo-sensitivities (for example, if they have slept badly will they need to work within a different environment than usual?).

Awareness of the 'double empathy problem' is crucial. Contrary to the common misunderstanding that autistic people 'cannot' empathise (this is not true), the double empathy problem suggests that the quality of contact is influenced by autistic and neurotypical people being mutually challenged in their understanding of one another, due to differences in how each understand the world. Evaluate and deconstruct your own 'theory of mind' – how do you know that your attributions of particular mental states to your colleagues are accurate?

Do not disenfranchise your autistic colleague by making your goal about achieving 'competence' in understanding autism. To truly achieve social justice in academia you need to be flexible, be aware of your own biases, take on a perennial, scholarly approach to working with neurodiversity, and always try to recognise the locus of intersubjective power during interactions.

This brings me to the third step: taking action. It is not the responsibility of minority members alone to speak up and make change, especially when the systemic distribution of power is against them. Those in higher academic positions have the greatest power to influence meaningful change. However, top-down change cannot be enacted without full and direct involvement of autistic people themselves.

A fourth step involves measuring meaningful outcomes. What constitutes a meaningful outcome may be very different for each individual. It could include the autistic person staying

in employment, working full-time, reporting increased quality of life (using autism-specific measures – they do exist!), experiencing ‘autistic joy’ (the unparalleled magnificent, awe-inspiring, and meaningful emotional and physiological experiences that autists have when engaging in their special interests), or feeling included, listened to, validated, and respected.

Crucially, when measuring meaningful individual outcomes, it is important to be aware that autistic people’s experiences may evolve and so should your support and understanding. In concert with the scientific method, iteration is a process whereby repetition yields results that are incrementally closer to the desired result.

Autistic people are often more ‘disabled’ by the culture that we live in than by our brains and diagnoses.

There are no definitive answers, no one-size-fits-all approach, only a process that begins with the understanding that to achieve equity, in academia and elsewhere, we cannot treat everyone equally. We need to give each individual, neurodivergent or not, the specific support that they need to succeed. Call me an idealist, but I hope that the end goal will be to commit to compassionately and curiously collaborating to redesign an academic climate that is accessible and inclusive for the spectrum of diversity.

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