Factors That Influence Career Choice: Insights From A Participatory Study with Autistic and Non-Autistic College Students

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Background & Rationale
Autistic adults struggle to find and maintain employment. Past research has shown that autistic adults face challenges while in the workforce, such as lack of understanding and discrimination from coworkers. Autistic individuals who have a secondary mental illness, such as anxiety or depression, face greater difficulties securing employment with proper accommodations than those without. Autistic individuals often feel isolated in the workplace due to difficulties with social communication. Many autistic adults report that challenges with verbal communication led to difficulties in forming relationships with employers and coworkers. Despite such challenges, autistic individuals have many strengths that can assist them in the workplace. Prior research has found that autistic individuals were more likely to identify attention to detail as a strength and tend to have a detail-focused style of information processing. Autistic individuals have also expressed that they are confident in themselves and their ability to succeed. They work diligently on the tasks they are assigned to and to achieve their goals.

Objectives of Study
- To identify the motivations of autistic college students in their career selection
- To determine how autistic students plan to use their strengths to overcome challenges seeking work

Hypotheses
- Autistic students will be more likely to be motivated by helping others and passion in their career choice than non-autistic students.
- Autistic students will be more likely than non-autistic students to emphasize their writing skills and detail-orientation as job-related skills than non-autistic students.
- Autistic students will be more likely than non-autistic students to expect challenges related to discrimination as well as their executive functioning and social skills.

Participants
- Autistic students (n=85) recruited from multiple college campuses throughout the United States, United Kingdom, and other countries
- Non-autistic students (n=56) from a single-subject pool in the United States

Measures
- Data were collected via the Cross-Institutional Needs Assessment (CAN) survey
- The following questions were the focus of this study:
  - What type of job do you hope to get after you graduate?
  - Why is this job of interest to you?
  - What skills do you have that could help you succeed in your dream job?
  - What challenges might you face getting or keeping your dream job?

Data Analysis
- Two independent coders developed codes inductively, based on patterns in the data
- Obtained reliability of above 90% for 20% of the data

Results
- Autistic college students reported similar reasons for choosing their career to non-autistic students.
- Both groups were motivated by their desire to help others and their passion for the career.

Table 1. Autistic and Non-Autistic Students' Reasons for Choosing Their Career

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Autistic</th>
<th>Non-Autistic</th>
<th>p value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Help Others</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>0.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passion</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Security</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>5%</td>
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</tbody>
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General Discussion
- Findings suggest that programs designed to assist autistic college students should
  - focus on building on their strengths
  - offer mental health support
  - offer social skills training
  - develop ways to combat discrimination in the workplace

References