

What I Want Colleagues To Know About Being An Autist

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I want you to imagine yourself in a banquet hall with one hundred other people. It's noisy, abuzz with conversation, and there is an exciting science-fair like atmosphere. You see your department head and a few familiar people and walk toward them, hoping to join their conversation, but you're unable to catch their eye, and when you start listening and interacting, you just can't seem to get a word in. They are debating fine details of a research problem that is intriguing to you, and you want to add in your thoughts, but you are ignored. You move through the room trying to connect. Conversations are happening in earnest around you but you still can't mesh with anyone. You try and speak, only to have someone speak over you, impassioned with their argument. Those around you present facts in a logical, 'Spock-ish' way. You interject a clever pun into a chat with a group

of three you recognize from a Council committee, only to have them physically turn away from you and return to their debate, disregarding your joke. Tough crowd! You try to interpret the looks on their faces but they give you no hints at any faux-pas you might have committed. You notice that everyone seems absorbed in their dyads and triads, their speeches expertly delivered and convincing to each other. Some people are blunt with their responses but no one seems surprised by the bluntness. It's like another language is being spoken around you that you just can't figure out. You feel inept and snubbed, even though on campus you are their equal, a well-known orator with a great sense of humour, and successful as a researcher, teacher, scholar, artist. You suddenly want to leave, convinced that this is a bad dream.

How would that situation feel to you? Now imagine that was everyday life for you as it is for many faculty members from equity-deserving groups such as women, Indigenous people, or those with disabilities. Every day you arrive on campus, and every day, you just don't fit in. You put much energy into trying to mimic the behaviours of those around you, but leave exhausted and feeling like your efforts are futile. Your department staff respond to you using one-word answers because they just don't get you and they want to avoid talking with you for any length of time. Despite solid teaching evaluations and a record of grant success, you are not nominated for awards by your colleagues. Your tenure application is accepted, but promotion denied because of your "lack of collegiality." You feel misunderstood by your peers. There is empathy for your colleagues' exhaustion and challenges, but not for your own.

I'm an autist. Some would say "I have autism" (i.e., like I have a disease) or "I'm autistic" (like I am currently of a particular hair colour, or overheated, but could

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change those characteristics by dyeing my hair or stepping outside). Medical models of autism define it in specific ways, such as a set of impairments leading to social and communicative pathologies. Under that model, I need to fix my lapses in identifying social cues, improve my tone of voice and forthrightness, make simpler word choices, and stop my frequent habit of being overstimulated. I prefer identifying as an autistic because I believe my brain's physical structure combined with living in an environment with confusing social expectations and unmet rights as a human describe my disability more completely. And, my autism is unchangeable (despite decades of work to camouflage the symptoms I have that are most irritating to neurotypicals). I might not struggle as I do if there weren't as many social barriers for me.

Other autists choose to identify in different ways and I respect their choices to do so. What's important is that autists control their own identity and narrative. To date, doctors, parents, teachers, researchers, psychologists, journalists, the authors of the DSM-V, and advocates have controlled autistic voices, but that is changing. I'm a member of a number of research, support, and advocacy groups (some numbering 100K+ members internationally), and these groups actively debate autism definitions, identity, and treatments. Cancel culture exists for former well-known advocates, autists, and researchers like Dr. Temple Grandin, and Professor Sir Simon Baron-Cohen (who is now heading up the largest ever and very controversial

study on autism in the United Kingdom called The Spectrum 10K project where researchers are collecting DNA samples from 10,000 autists). Longstanding therapies like applied behavioural analysis are sometimes termed cruel and abusive for trying to make people with autism 'normal'. This is instead of pushing for inclusion of neurodiversity; that is, the idea that people with autism, ADHD, Tourette's, or other neurodevelopmental conditions, are accepted as part of a spectrum of natural differences in neurological structure and function.

Discussion of the differences between autism awareness, acceptance, and inclusion occur across news outlets, in popular books and blogs, within social media groups, and in academic and non-academic platforms, but go largely unnoticed by neurotypical audiences. This is despite key guiding principles of the UN's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities articulating respect for differences as a part of human diversity, and respect for the rights of children to preserve their identities.

I encourage you to look some of this up if you are interested in knowing more about current perspectives in autism communities. These debates can get heated, and statistics on autistic lifespan, and maltreatment by police, educators, and health services will be surprising to you. But for now, I'd like to circle back to that academic scenario I had you imagine initially. Picture a world where there were more autists, and more neu-

rodiverse individuals than neurotypicals. Imagine how hard you would find your daily life if that scenario was true and you had to work at *not* being you for the benefit of everyone else, or live isolated, alone, institutionalized. At this time, estimates are that 1 in 66 Canadian children are autists. Autism is not temporary; autists do grow up and become adults, many of whom are employed, though at much lower rates. You have colleagues, trainees, and students that are autists.

Like me, they experience ableism similar to that described in the scenario. Ableism takes the form of being ignored by dominant populations for being different. Ableism takes the form of not including an autistic's suggestions in meeting minutes because they differ from the majority. Ableism is being told that if an autistic is 'high-functioning,' they must not suffer as much. Ableism takes the form of a job interviewee's slip with the use of 'retard' in their talk, leaving you to decide if it's worth your mental health to disrupt the interview and correct the interviewee (I'm glad I did, and I thank my colleagues who followed up with me afterwards). Ableism takes the form of someone asking you about your 'special interest,' 'savant ability' or 'special needs' when language like 'focused interest' or 'human needs' are preferred and less patronizing (and less than 10% of autists are savants). Ableism takes the form of your children being described as 'at risk for autism.' Ableism is a colleague asking repeatedly about life as an autistic so they can pick up

tips for their autistic student without realizing the emotional burden of relaying these experiences, nor the time it takes away from work that is valued in tenure files. Ableism is being asked to ‘tone it down’ after a faculty meeting when you raise a point about equity. Ableism takes the form of inviting an autistic into leadership training that employs personality testing created to characterize people by their traits which emerged from research only on neurotypical people. Ableism takes the form of reviewing tri-council applications of researchers applying to study the economic burden of autism, the genetic defects of autistics, the optimal outcome or curative practice rhetoric, a person’s ability to ‘pass’ as non-autistic, and the impact of autism as symbolized by a puzzle piece. Ableism takes the form of a strategic proposal that describes autism as an epidemic. Ableism takes the form of a university-wide equity, diversity, and inclusion policy that makes no mention of eliminating ableism alongside its commitment to advancing policies on preventing sexual assault and anti-racism (which we do need, and I don’t intend to minimize here).

While you may think these are extreme examples, I’ve experienced every one of these ableist activities, policies, and practices in the last twelve months. Some col-

leagues have been supportive allies, but others are oblivious that this happens here at USASK, and what they can do. I’m going to give you a few suggestions but please know that there are more actions you could take.

First, know that autism is not temporary, contagious, caused by vaccinations or parenting styles, and does not go away in adulthood. Correct people who say otherwise and teach your family about autism. Don’t ever say “You don’t seem autistic.” If you don’t currently know why that is offensive, please take some time to find out. Second, if someone discloses their autism status to you, ask them if and how they want to be identified, and don’t ‘out’ them. Third, don’t ask about an autistic’s level of function because categorizing functionality belittles the amount of work autists do to appear neurotypical (leading to distress and burnout) and does not reflect the diversity of daily challenges that autists confront. Fourth, disrupt ableism when you notice it. A quick “Ouch” or “That sounds ableist to me. Is that what you meant?” is all it takes to alert someone that they have misspoken. Fifth, redirect your curiosity about autism to sources that you can explore on your own time. There are many experts here in Canada on autism in adults

whose work you can read (see Heather Brown at Alberta, Grace Iarocci at Simon Fraser, Kimberly Maich at Memorial, and Natasha Artemeva at Carleton who is doing some work on autistic university students’ extraordinary communication skills). Closer to home, the Accessibility and Equity Services office can help you with accommodations plans for your students. Sixth, nominate an autistic for an award. In a neurotypical-dominated world, it is great to be noticed. Seventh, consider whose interest you are serving when you invite an autistic to appear on a panel or in a workshop, especially if they are pre-tenure. Finally, imagine what it is like for an autistic in your class, your lab, your studio, your department, college, or school, and recognize that in a social model of disability, you have a role to play in enhancing autists’ dignity.

Let’s go back to that scenario one more time. In an alternate world, a person at the banquet hall notices you and walks with you up to a group, working to ensure that you are included in the conversation. The next day, your department head asks “How was that banquet for you? What could I have done to support you better there?” What a difference those small acts make.

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