

Information Behavior Analysis: Autistic Persons in Higher Education

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INTRODUCTION

VARYING DEFINITIONS OF "AUTISM"

- There are many definitions of autism, and each definition differs in connotation.
 - The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or CDC, define autism as a "developmental disability caused by differences in the brain" (2022), whereas the National Institute of Mental Health, or NIMH, defines autism as a "neurological and developmental disorder that affects how people interact with others, communicate, learn, and behave" (2023).
 - These definitions create a view of what autistic persons look like, which can create stigmas and assumed views whenever someone hears the term "autism."
 - Negative behavior is often replicated once established, normalizing this behavior by neurotypical individuals. This, of course, is not well received by the autism community, creating barriers when seeking information (Link & Phelan, 2001).

AUTISM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

- White et al. Study (2011, pp. 694-695)
 - Increase in autistic persons entering higher education
 - Between 1 in 130 and 1 in 53 met criteria for high-functioning autism disorder
 - Likely an even higher percentage of students who are undiagnosed and unaware they have autism

CHALLENGES AUTISTIC PERSONS FACE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

LANGUAGE USE

- "We are not people who 'just happen to have autism'" (Sainsbury, 2000, p. 12, as cited in Milton, 2021, p. 1). Autistic persons often choose to embrace autism as part of their identity as an individual, preferring people first language such as "autistic individuals" to "people with autism."

OVERCOMING STIGMAS AND PERCEIVED DECREASED INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

- Autistic persons pursuing college degrees is the lack of support systems they have once they leave high school (Newman et. al, 2011, pp. 49-50).
 - Less than 40% of autistic college students complete their college education
 - Roughly 4% did not complete college because they did not get the services they needed
 - Too much freedom with little structure compared to high school (Kuder & Accardo, 2018, pp. 722-723)
- Distrust of outsider sources impacts whether autistic students self-identify and seek support systems (Shattuck et al., 2014; Barnhill, 2016; as cited in Everhart & Escobar, 2018, p. 270).
 - Fear being labeled as "disabled" and judged by their disability
 - Aware of stigmatizations, which could change how they're interacted with across campus
 - Afraid their instructors will not provide them with accommodations because "autism is considered an invisible disorder," and therefore not obvious like those who suffer from vision impairments etc.

SENSORY OVERLOAD

- Sensory overload is defined as triggering a "fight, flight, or freeze response" in response to an overstimulation of the five senses: sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste (Loving, 2022).
- Can manifest for autistic individuals as they enter loud, crowded spaces like a library
- Autistic persons often experience sensory overload when seeking information, which can inhibit them from acting

IMPACT OF CO-MORBID CONDITIONS

- White et al. Study (2011, p. 692) and Everhart & Escobar Study (2018, p. 296)
 - Correlation between autism and conditions
 - Conditions such as anxiety and communication disorders can interfere with information seeking behaviors.
 - Can lead to sensory overload, increased risk of negative interactions with "outsiders," and library anxiety

APPLICABLE INFORMATION BEHAVIOR MODELS AND THEORIES

RESEARCHING INFORMATION BEHAVIORS OF AUTISTIC PERSONS

- Information behavior is defined as "the totality of human behavior in relation to sources and channels of information, including both active and passive information seeking, and information use" (Wilson, 2000, p. 49).
- Research available focuses either on medical information, including child development, or on the information behaviors of parents of autistic persons.
 - Sensory overload, anxiety, depression, and communication disorders strongly impact the ability of autistic individuals to seek information.
- Information behavior studies of autistic persons are emerging in newer research.
 - Possible that statistics will continue to increase, or perhaps show new correlations between having autism and other co-morbid conditions, impacting their information behaviors.
- Gibson & Hanson-Baldauf Study (2018, section 4):
 - Used "social media and online environments as personal infrastructure for building place-based [in-person] communities."
 - Prefer using the internet to actively seek information in order to:
 - control their sensory input and reduce sensory overload
 - control how much information they received and from who
 - engage with others under clear expectations and with safety measures in place
 - Active in seeking out information sources that are accurate and timely.
 - Prefer to find immediate solutions from authoritative sources for their information needs.

CHATMAN'S THEORY OF INFORMATION POVERTY

- **Key concept:** "Deception, risk-taking, secrecy, and situational relevance," leading to marginalized groups acting with defensive behaviors (Chatman, 1996, p. 194)
- Neurotypical (Outsider) vs. Neurodivergent (Insider)
 - Having increased anxiety, depression, a communication disorder, or a combination thereof can cause a heightened sense of insider versus outsider (Everhart & Escobar, 2018, p. 269).
- Availability and depth of information can be influenced by outsiders, who either share or withhold information.
- Can be distrustful of information systems designed by neurotypicals and will abandon seeking information due to misinformation provided or inability to access information due to formatting or readability concerns (Gibson & Hanson-Baldauf, 2018).

MELLON'S THEORY OF LIBRARY ANXIETY

- **Key concept:** Students feel severe anxiety about revealing their self-determined inadequacy when it comes to their library use skills, and that by interacting with librarians this inadequacy will become negatively highlighted (Mellon, 1986).
- Sensory overload (i.e. large, loud environment) largely impacts the idea of "library anxiety."
 - Libraries are loud, crowded, and have multiple floors with robust collections that can be overstimulating
 - Will leave library without getting the information they were actively seeking due to increased passive receiving of information
- Feelings of being lost and scared were overpowering due to size of the library and lack of knowledge of where materials were located.
 - Created immediate barriers to accessing information

SAVOLAINEN'S EVERYDAY LIFE INFORMATION SEEKING MODEL

- **Key concept:** Basic information needs (i.e. bus schedules, doctors' offices) are met by actively finding information to solve problems not directly related to work (Savolainen, 1995).
- Gibson & Hanson-Baldauf Study (2018, section 4):
 - Prefer accurate, timely, and authoritative sources that provide immediate solutions for information needs
- As it applies to higher education:
 - Instructor office hours
 - Local transportation schedules
 - Available campus support services

IMPROVING SERVICES FOR AUTISTIC PERSONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

UNIVERSAL DESIGN

- Designing better, more accessible information systems and services throughout higher education that have autistic persons, both diagnosed and undiagnosed, in mind.
 - Provide flexibility into as many spaces and resources as possible (Gibson & Hanson-Baldauf, 2018, section 6)
 - Decreasing sensory overload
 - Access to quiet, low-sensory areas
 - Allowing students to dim lights within specific spaces
 - Facilitate online and place-based (in-person) learning environments
 - Breaking barriers and dissolving stigmas by using inclusive language
 - Improving accessibility in online course shells
 - Video lecture with accompanying downloadable PowerPoint presentation & transcript
 - Printed and digital materials are ADA-compliant
 - Provide digital materials in an editable and printable format to fit user needs

RELATED LITERATURE

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