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Employment of Adults with ASD: A Motivational Perspective



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Definition

Work has a central role in adult life. Employment integration can fulfill a variety of needs, from basic subsistence, through social inclusion, to an expression of personal interests, abilities, self-concepts and values (Blustein 2013). Although employment of adults diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) has received growing attention and effort, outcomes in this field remain unsatisfactory. In aim of taking the field foreword, new theoretical perspectives can shed more light on labor market integration of adults with ASD. We suggest that the self-determination theory (SDT) of motivation (Deci and Ryan 2000) has the potential to expand our knowledge and inform vocational rehabilitation practice.

Historical Background

In view of the growing prevalence of ASD, more and more diagnosed individuals face the transition from childhood and adolescence into adulthood, which presents new, complicated challenges. Concurrently, research looking into adult outcomes is growing in number and in breadth. The last decades have seen transition in the conceptualization of successful adult outcomes for individuals with ASD, with outcomes becoming more specific and measures more valid and reliable. As part of this change, employment has become a specific outcome criterion in adulthood (Henninger and Taylor 2013). Hence, the history of autism and employment in research and practice is relatively young, and the road to successful employment is still considerably unpaved.

Looking at the literature up to the present time, three main research directions are evident: evaluations of employment outcomes; conceptualizations of strengths and barriers to work; and assessments of interventions, aiming to point out what elements promote success.

Many studies quantify employment outcomes of adults with ASD, in comparison to the general population and to other clinical groups. Overall, results show high rates of unemployment, unfavorable job conditions for those who do work, and a relatively high prevalence of “overeducation,” representing the gap between educational attainments and actual jobs (Baldwin et al. 2014). Outcomes are unfavorable not only in

comparison to the general population but also to other disabilities (Chen et al. 2015).

A second body of knowledge is directed at defining common work-related strengths and challenges. Many studies have been devoted to this objective, examining perspectives of employees, employers, and other stakeholders involved, such as parents and vocational rehabilitation practitioners. The picture known to us today is quite detailed and consistent across studies. Challenges that frequently arise when facing employment are related to communication and social deficits, cognitive functions (specifically impairments in executive functions), and difficulties modulating sensory stimuli. These various difficulties can be a constant source of stress and anxiety, which also pose a central obstacle for individuals with ASD who seek employment (Chen et al. 2015; Hendricks 2010).

Alongside the challenges, there are also unique characteristics that may give individuals with ASD an advantage in the work domain. Research lists advantages such as enhanced visual search abilities, a preference for detail-oriented tasks, and a systematic working style (Chen et al. 2015; Hendricks 2010). Characteristic “special interests” have been also suggested to lead to expertise that can form an advantage in certain fields (Winter-Messiers 2007). Moreover, employers of workers with ASD reported favorable personal characteristics such as punctuality, devotion, and consistency, which are perceived as contributing to work performance (Scott et al. 2017).

Last, in an attempt to overcome barriers to employment, interventions aimed at promoting employment integration were developed. Programs answering the needs of adults with ASD have been documented for over a decade. These target the common obstacles described above and apply different strategies for success. Commonly, the curriculum includes improving social and executive skills. Interventions offer work placement along with personalized supports and accommodations (Hedley et al. 2017). These practices seem promising, as research results show good outcomes. However, there is still a long way to go in means of the quality of research

being done and the ability to generalize and disseminate research findings for the benefit of successful inclusion of the wide population of adults with ASD in the vocational world.

Current Knowledge

Two notable trends are prominent in the literature in recent years. The first widens the scope beyond the personal characteristics of the individuals seeking employment and suggests environmental accommodations are also obligatory. A focus on finding a fit between the person, the job, and the occupational surrounding is becoming more and more prominent. Success is no longer considered solely the responsibility of the individual, and the environment is also expected to adjust (Scott et al. 2019; Waisman-Nitzan et al. 2018). In addition, it is becoming clear that the key to success involves cooperation of multiple stakeholders (Nicholas et al. 2018).

The second trend, aligned with the neurodiversity movement, encourages organizations to accept workers with ASD and benefit from the unique characteristics and skills they may bring to the job. This strength-based approach emphasizes the need to highlight ASD-related strengths that can be relevant to the labor market. A common expression of this approach can be found in the suggestion that characteristic “special interests” can be used to promote labor market integration (Winter-Messiers 2007; Kirchner and Dziobek 2014). This approach has been complimented by cultural trends, portrayed in the media and through anecdotal autobiographical accounts of individuals with autism. These cases demonstrate how a special interest in a specific field, matched with high abilities, can lead to a successful career (Grandin 2006). This potential match has been discussed in the field but has not been systematically studied (Harrop et al. 2019). The feasibility of using this approach in a wider population of adults with ASD seeking employment has been questioned (Goldfarb et al. 2019) and requires further investigation.

Without underestimating the importance of promoting workplace diversity, the reality of the

labor market holds expectations for performance, productiveness, and profitability. Hence, a creative and pragmatic approach is needed to integrate these possibly contradicting approaches.

Overall, knowledge in the field of employment of adults with ASD is relatively young and still facing major development. Comparatively, research of employment within the general population has a rich history rooted in various disciplines. The use of well-established theories as a lens for further understanding of employment of adults with ASD is therefore warranted. Among the various theories of work, motivation has been widely researched within different disciplines (e.g., career psychology, organizational research, human resources, occupational therapy) and with relation to different contexts, including work, education, and health. Work motivation holds the potential of promoting action and perseverance. Since work can be a source of stress, with workers expected to carry out tasks in which they do not find interest or that do not match their level of training, motivation is important for maintaining long-term stability, an important goal for adults with ASD.

Common theories cluster work motivation into two basic categories: extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation to work is aimed at receiving benefits apart from the work itself, such as income or praise (Gagné and Deci 2005). Studies show that it was found to be associated with less favorable outcomes such as lower job satisfaction, higher emotional exhaustion, impatience, lower ability to solve problems, less creativity, and more turnover intention.

Intrinsic motivation is defined as an engagement in work primarily for its own sake, because the work itself is interesting. Unlike extrinsic motivation, studies suggest that being intrinsically motivated to work has beneficial effects such as a higher sense of autonomy and higher levels of work performance and adaptation. Therefore, an intrinsic interest, achieved through matching between personal interests and environment, is one of the core theoretical foundations in vocational theories (Blustein 2013). In relation to ASD, it has been suggested that intrinsic

motivation can be prompted by matching between special interests and jobs (Kirchner and Dziobek 2014; Winter-Messiers 2007).

Despite the clear benefits of intrinsic motivation, an intrinsically interesting job is not always a possibility, especially for populations faced with barriers and disabling conditions. In order to deal with this discrepancy, SDT has been suggested as a powerful lens through which work motivation can be addressed (Gagné and Deci 2005). The theory is distinct from other theories of motivation by two main conceptualizations: (a) it goes beyond the extrinsic vs. intrinsic motivation dichotomy and defines different categories of extrinsic motivation and (b) the theory addresses personal needs that have the potential of facilitating more adaptive forms of extrinsic motivation, thus “fueling” the motivational process.

With regard to the first distinction, SDT places different levels of motivation on a continuum. At one end is intrinsic motivation, considered to present the highest level of self-determined behavior, and at the other end is amotivation, which reflects no intention to act. In between, different levels of extrinsic motivation are described: On the lower end, external motivation describes an action aiming for an external desired outcome (such as earning money or getting approval), or avoiding a negative one (such as being fired); interjected motivation describes a form of motivation in which the individual accepts the action as his own, relating to concepts such as ego involvement and self-worth (such as feeling proud or avoiding shame). This kind of motivation is considered internalized, but is still relatively controlled because it involves pressure to behave in a certain way; identified motivation accompanies actions that are congruent with personal goals and identities. Even when these activities are not intrinsically interesting or even unpleasant, they are viewed as important and hold personal significance. The higher the motivation is on the continuum, the more it involves acting with a sense of desire and having an experience of choice and self-determination (Gagné and Deci 2005).

Another aspect distinguishing SDT from other motivation theories is the conception that self-determined behavior can be achieved only when

three psychological needs are satisfied: competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Gagné and Deci 2005). The feeling of autonomy provides a sense of authenticity, choice, volition, and self-regulation; Social relatedness is the feeling of being connected to others in a meaningful way; finally, the need for competence is related to a person's basic strive to experience success and a feeling of mastery. Accordingly, SDT suggests that frustration of these three basic needs can lead to a decrease in motivation.

Coming back to what we know about ASD and employment, inferences can be suggested on the basis of current knowledge: The need for *autonomy* may also involve dealing with uncertainty, which may be a source of stress for individuals with ASD. However, autonomy was identified as one of the factors leading to job satisfaction in adults with ASD (Pfeiffer et al. 2018). Furthermore, in the general population, studies did show that the need for autonomy can also be fulfilled in a structured environment (Jang et al. 2010), i.e., that autonomy is not necessarily tied with ambiguity.

Work provides an important opportunity for social interaction in daily life and a chance to experience *social relatedness*. This opportunity is especially important for adults with ASD, for whom work is sometimes the only setting for meeting other people. In contrast to the common stereotype that individuals with ASD prefer to be alone, there is clear evidence to support their need for social engagement (Jaswal and Akhtar 2019). In the work arena, individuals with ASD mention social inclusion as a major factor leading to employment satisfaction and success (Krieger et al. 2012; Pfeiffer et al. 2018). Hence, the contribution of social relatedness experience to work satisfaction can help maintain motivation over time, without having to depend on an ongoing interest in the tasks performed.

Turning to the need for *competence*, it has been found that workers with ASD, as well as other populations, want to see themselves as good workers and take pride in their skills (Müller et al. 2003). Lorenz and Heinitz (2014) found a positive relationship between occupational self-

efficacy and proactiveness, which can be considered a form of self-determined behavior.

To conclude, the basic needs portrayed by SDT hold relevance for individuals with ASD seeking stability and satisfaction in the workplace. The unsatisfactory occupational outcomes mentioned above, along with common gaps between the intellectual potential and employment demands, may detain success. To address this gap, motivational anchors like autonomy, relatedness, and competence can promote satisfaction and stability.

Future Directions

Employment of adults with ASD is a relatively new field of research, which requires more input. As current knowledge is limited in scope and depth, new research directions have the potential to spark fresh insights regarding employment of adults with ASD. Theories of motivation such as SDT can uncover the underlying mechanisms that enhance work motivation and promote other desirable employment outcomes. The emphasis on the work environment, which can be shaped and adjusted in order to respond to the workers' needs and support them, contributes to the promising notion that motivation is not just a given state, but can rather be facilitated toward a feeling of autonomy and volition. Future studies that substantiate empirical validation of the theory in relation to adults with ASD can take us a step further in achieving this goal.

The theoretical perspective of SDT can also inform vocational practice. When facing a career choice, SDT can help prioritize different considerations that should be taken into account: manifestation of interest areas, probability of success, characteristics of the social environment, work stress, and environmental factors. When an intrinsically motivating job is not available at a given point in time, other motives to work might be established. Interventions aimed at promoting employment integration can potentially prompt work motivation by focusing on fulfilling the needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence, (Silva et al. 2014). For example, autonomy

support can be enhanced by providing the option to choose between job alternatives; support for competence can be achieved by choosing gradual and realistic employment goals and offer practical guidance and support in achieving them; support for relatedness can be facilitated by enhancing relationships in the workplace, leading to a feeling of belonging. Satisfaction of these needs can be monitored by the employer or by a vocational coach through an open channel of communication. With this approach, motivational setbacks can be addressed, and needs can be answered to maintain stability and prevent attrition.

Future studies examining motivation and other work-related theories should also aim to understand workers with ASD in comparison to fellow neurotypical workers. If we aspire to create a work environment that is beneficial for all workers, motivations and needs of diverse populations should be assessed, considering their similarities and differences. Taking into account the high heterogeneity in ASD, these understandings can promote interventions that are more sensitive to individual differences and lead to a better understanding of “what works for whom”. Future studies that address the issues raised in this chapter, and apply more fundamental theories of work to adults with ASD, can advance the field and pave new roads for employment success.

See Also

- ▶ [Competitive Employment](#)
- ▶ [Employment in Adult Life](#)
- ▶ [Employment Trends for People with ASD](#)
- ▶ [Restricted Interests](#)

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