

# Framing Autism in the Hiring Process: How Diagnostic Disclosure Shapes First Impressions

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## Abstract

Job applicants who disclose an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) diagnosis are expected to face different treatment in the hiring process than those who exhibit ASD symptoms without disclosing a diagnosis. Although autism diagnoses are becoming increasingly common, workplace inclusion remains limited. This paper reviews the current literature on the topic through the lens of impression formation theory. It also explores the decision to disclose a diagnosis in different contexts, and how masking behaviour in individuals with ASD can hinder their well-being. Research has shown that employers may favour neurotypical candidates over neurodivergent ones, despite the latter's valuable skills and qualities. This paper suggests that further research is required to investigate the role of language in hiring decisions. Additionally, it calls for more research on company policies and the Employment Equity Act. As companies and employers aim to diversify their workforce, a better understanding of how language influences candidate evaluations is crucial for reducing bias and promoting fair employment opportunities for individuals with autism.

**Keywords:** *autism, employment, hiring bias, language framing, disclosure, diagnosis.*

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## Introduction

Autism in the workplace is a topic that remains underexplored, despite its importance in fostering inclusive employment practices and its relevance in hiring decisions. As the number of autism diagnoses continues to grow, there is an urgent need to address hiring biases and workplace discrimination rooted in harmful stereotypes. In 2022, the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) published a report highlighting key findings from the 2019 Canadian Health Survey on Children and Youth (CHSCY) (Statistics Canada, 2019). According

to this survey, 2.0% of Canadian children and youth aged 1-17 years were diagnosed with some form of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2022). According to the Department of Justice Canada (2023), 80% of people with intellectual disabilities, including autism, are unemployed. Most high school graduates in this population continuously struggle to find employment, despite the training they have received, and the experience gained from work placements.

Although there have been improvements with hiring practices for individuals with disabilities, the subtle ways that diagnostic

language influences employer perceptions remain underexamined. This literature review begins by examining the diagnostic criteria for autism spectrum disorder and its implications in the workplace. It then discusses impression formation theory to explain how diagnostic labels can influence social judgments and perceptions, as well as how these can affect hiring decisions. Next, the review focuses on two interrelated areas: disclosure, and masking (camouflaging) behaviours among autistic individuals, including factors that may promote or deter diagnostic disclosure. Finally, it reviews the gap in the existing literature regarding the employment of autistic individuals based on disclosure decisions.

This paper synthesizes existing research to show how diagnostic disclosure (e.g., using the ASD label during the hiring process) may activate stereotypes that shape hiring outcomes, examined through the lens of impression formation theory.

### **Theoretical Framework: Impression Formation**

Impression formation theory was first introduced by Solomon Asch (1946). In the classic warm-cold study, participants were exposed to identical trait lists of either "warm" descriptions or "cold" descriptions of a person. Participants then wrote down their impression of the target person (Nauts et al., 2014). What Asche (1946) discovered was that a certain trait (e.g., "intelligent" or "deceptive") act as central traits, which shape overall perceptions of a target person.

Although new research has been conducted based on Asch's original work, his theory remains especially relevant in hiring contexts. Impressions of job candidates are often formed quickly and through standardized means (Chernyshenko & Stark, 2005). In the case of autistic applicants, impression formation may be influenced by their decision to disclose their diagnosis to the employer. The inclusion of a clinical label may activate schemas or reinforce stereotypes about autism.

While linguistic information is crucial to forming first impressions, Willis and Todorov (2006) found that people can make initial judgements of others based on their facial

appearances after 100 milliseconds. In their research, they discovered that impressions that were made at this speed were almost as consistent as those formed by participants viewing faces with no time limit. Applying these findings to the job hiring process, evaluators can make decisions based on minimal information, and before any substantive interaction occurs. Adding an autism diagnosis into the mix can speed up these decisions. Throughout this literature review, analyses of past research will be analyzed through the lens of impression formation theory. Before exploring the research that has come out about autism and the hiring process, it is important to define some key terms that will be used throughout the analysis.

### **Key Terms**

*Impression formation:* The psychological process by which individuals form opinions or judgements about others based on limited information, such as appearance, behaviour, or language (Asch, 1946).

*Framing/diagnostic framing:* The way that the information is structured or presented, which influences how it is interpreted by the receiver (Thibodeau & Boroditsky, 2011). In diagnostic framing, it is the presentation or omission of a diagnostic label which can trigger pre-existing biases/stereotypes.

*Disclosure:* The act of revealing one's autism diagnosis to another party (close friends, family, employers, etc.)

*Masking:* The intentional (or subconscious) suppression or alteration of autistic traits to appear more like neurotypical individuals. This is done often to avoid stigma or discrimination (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019). Often causes mental and physical exhaustion.

### **Literature Review**

The American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5) defines autism spectrum disorder (ASD) as a neurodevelopmental condition marked by persistent deficits in social communication and restricted, repetitive behaviours, with symptoms

present from early development and significantly impacting daily functioning (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2025). British Columbia reported a crude prevalence of ASD as 2.2%, with a 95% confidence interval (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2022).

As more children with ASD enter adulthood, autism and other related disorders will become increasingly prevalent in the workplace. According to the Canadian Academy of Health Sciences (2022), many autistic people want to work. Still, they are not included in the labour market due to social factors in public-facing jobs, inaccessible means of transportation, and concerns about being isolated on the job, among other challenges.

### Diagnosis Disclosure

The disclosure of an autism diagnosis can be one of the largest hurdles to overcome for job applicants (Romualdez et al., 2021). How disclosure is framed (e.g., the language used) can influence how evaluators perceive a candidate. This, in turn, can activate or reduce stereotypes, depending on how disclosure is handled (McMahon, 2025). We can compare this idea to how people disclose a highly stigmatized mental health disorder, such as depression. A study done by Reali and colleagues (2016) on depression found that certain linguistic cues can lead to biases during first impressions. Moreover, they found that when using metaphors such as "depression is a place in space" (e.g., a person fell into a deep depression) and "depression is an opponent" (e.g., within the claws of depression), the participants exposed to the latter condition agreed that it is better to be separated from the depressed individual.

Previous studies in cognitive science and cognitive linguistics have shown that the language we use may influence our perception of people, and other events/situations. For instance, Thibodeau & Boroditsky (2011) investigated how metaphors influence the way people think about complex political issues. These linguistic cues may influence whether an individual with autism feels safe to disclose their diagnosis.

Research on ASD disclosure decisions has demonstrated the complexity of those decisions. For instance, Lindsay and colleagues (2021) conducted a systematic review across 26 studies, involving over 7,000 participants. They explored the disclosure of an autism diagnosis and its impact on workplace accommodations. They highlight that with disclosure, autistic individuals may experience greater social acceptance and inclusion, flexibility with accommodations, and an increased awareness of ASD (Lindsay et al., 2021). However, many ASD individuals do not disclose because of experiences with stigmatization and discrimination.

When disclosure does occur, there are a few common reasons as to why. These reasons include age of diagnosis, the social demands of a job, as well as workplace policies (Lindsay et al., 2021). These findings support that disclosure is embedded in impression management, not simply a means of getting support. Autistic individuals must weigh the benefits of self-advocacy against the risk of reinforcing negative stereotypes in evaluators (Thompson-Hodgetts et al., 2020). This is also in line with impression formation theory, which posits that limited information based on an individual's personality is enough to trigger cognitive schemas that influence how others perceive a candidate's competence and fit for a job (Thomas et al., 2022). Thus, disclosure is not simply a personal decision, but a strategic one; the decision to disclose is determined by anticipating how others will form impressions based on the autism label.

While Lindsay and colleagues (2021) provided broad insights on disclosure decisions, Nimante and colleagues (2023) offered a more in-depth exploration of individual disclosure through a case study in Latvia involving four autistic adults. This study aimed to investigate whether autism should be disclosed to an employer. They found that while these individuals had not disclosed their diagnosis to their employers or coworkers, they were open to sharing it with their close friends outside of the workplace (Nimante et al., 2023). They highlighted common reasons as to why participants chose not to disclose their autism.

Consistent with Lindsay and colleagues (2021), they found that fear of stigma, and desire

to be perceived as neurotypical were primary reasons for non-disclosure. Next, they did not feel there could be any benefits to disclosing. What was important to these participants was raising awareness among their employers about the unique limitations of individuals with ASD and how to overcome them, rather than just informing them about their own autistic status (Nimante et al., 2023). This suggests that merely stating a diagnosis may be less meaningful to employers than communicating an individual's specific support needs.

### **Masking/Camouflaging**

Studies on masking behaviours have previously observed similar patterns of selective disclosure (Alaghband-Rad et al., 2023; Cage & Toxell-Whitman, 2020; Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023). This related concept helps explain why many autistic individuals choose not to disclose their diagnosis in professional settings. It is also important to consider the fact that autism falls under the category of an "invisible" disability. This means that the disability is often not outwardly expressed.

One trait that is common amongst many autistic individuals is masking behaviour. Masking, or social camouflaging, is a characteristic of autistic individuals who actively try to hide (mask) their autism features in social contexts to blend in with the neurotypical population (Alaghband-Rad et al., 2023; Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2020).

While masking may reduce the risk of stigmatization in the moment, it is a very energy-consuming behaviour and can lead to other difficulties, including mental health disorders, poor well-being, and low job performance (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2020; Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023). When it comes to the hiring process, many autistic individuals will mask their autistic traits to appear more "normal" to a neurotypical evaluator (Perry et al., 2021).

As it can be challenging to maintain masking for long periods, the impression given during an interview may not accurately reflect the candidate's authentic workplace behaviour (Hull et al., 2017; Perry et al., 2021). While literature on masking is still developing, it is still important to understand the role it may play

during the hiring process. Given that interviews are highly performative social situations, autistic candidates may feel pressured to hide their autistic traits out of concern that they will be misinterpreted or stigmatized (Norris et al., 2024).

### **First Impressions**

A recent systematic review and meta-analysis by Wanigasekera and colleagues (2025) examined 21 studies comparing first impressions of autistic and non-autistic individuals across various modalities (e.g., video, audio, transcript). They found that autistic individuals were rated less favourably than their non-autistic counterparts. This was especially evident in the context where nonverbal cues are present. According to the paradigm of impression formation theory, these nonverbal cues can activate existing stereotypes (Riggio & Friedman, 1986; Foster et al., 2024).

However, this activation disappeared with the transcript condition (Wanigasekera et al., 2025). This indicates that the content of the speech is not as significant as the way it is presented. When autism is explicitly disclosed during the hiring process, raters may subconsciously associate it with negative traits (e.g., social awkwardness) (McMahon, 2025).

Moreover, findings from Wanigasekera and colleagues (2025) support the view that impression formation is also a product of the evaluator's own characteristics, perceptions, and biases. In the context of hiring, the mention of a diagnosis may be enough to override a candidate's credentials by cueing pre-existing beliefs about what autism means in a workplace (Norris et al., 2024; McMahon, 2025). Wanigasekera and colleagues (2025) found that increased knowledge about autism was associated with more positive perceptions of autism.

### **Barriers to Securing Employment**

While the DSM-5 primarily outlines autism in terms of deficits and challenges, and impressions of autistic individuals are often negatively skewed, it is equally important to recognize the strengths and positive qualities that autistic individuals can bring to the workplace. In a qualitative study, Cope and

Remington (2022) highlighted the lived experiences of 66 autistic individuals in the workplace. They asked participants to describe their views about employment-related strengths. Four areas where participants felt they were strongest included: cognitive advantages, efficiency, strengths related to personal qualities, and the ability to offer a unique autism-specific perspective.

Results from this study have mostly aligned with previous, although limited, literature. This is especially true for cognitive skills (e.g., attention to detail, pattern recognition, logic). However, they identified two strengths that were inconsistent with previous research: superior executive functioning and organizational abilities, as well as the capacity to show empathy (Cope & Remington, 2022). Moreover, participants expressed interest in tasks that neurotypical employees may dislike, such as repetitive tasks. This study highlights the value that autistic employees can bring to the workplace.

Despite the strengths that many autistic employees express, the process of securing employment is complicated for many. Using mock job interviews, Whelpley and May (2023) examined the job interview performance of those with ASD compared to neurotypical (NT) individuals. Both ASD and NT individuals were recorded doing interviews. Participants who were not told about the neurodiversity of the candidates were assigned one of two conditions: (1) watch a video of the interviewee or (2) read the interview transcripts without the video. Whelpley and May found that NT individuals outperformed individuals with ASD in the video condition.

However, individuals with ASD outperformed those without ASD in the transcript condition (Whelpley & May, 2023). The researchers suggest that "social style ... influences hiring decisions" in job interviews, which may bias recruiters against highly qualified candidates who may not align with the expected social norms. These findings suggest that the social style and patterns of autistic candidates may influence hiring outcomes.

In the United Kingdom, a study similar to Cope and Remington (2022) was conducted, focusing on the challenges of the hiring process using both quantitative and qualitative methods

(Davies et al., 2023). Researchers surveyed 225 ASD, 64 ND (neurodiverse; unspecified), and 88 NT (neurotypical) participants. They found four experiences that participants from all three groups commonly shared: (1) frustration with the focus on social skills; (2) perceived need for more flexible hiring processes; (3) desire for more clarity; and (4) the importance of the environment. It is important to understand that NT and ND experiences can be shared and are not always separate. Specific barriers that ASD participants reported about the hiring process included finding suitable opportunities in the first place, the initial written job application (due to AI screeners), being asked open-ended questions during the interview, and physical barriers.

Davies and colleagues (2023) explain that individuals with ASD may have a deficit in episodic memory recall, making open-ended questions (e.g., "tell me about a time when...") difficult to answer. In addition to the previous four experiences, this study identified three common experiences within the hiring process unique to ASD participants: they felt as though they had to mask to succeed in the interview, they struggled to read between the lines, and they risked discrimination or stigma against them if they chose to disclose their diagnosis or needs. These traits and barriers may influence hiring decisions based on how autism is framed in the application.

In 2021, Whelpley and colleagues conducted a study to bridge that gap using data from the employment histories of autistic individuals and individuals in managerial roles who oversee autistic employees. One of their research questions inquired about the experiences of autistic applicants and the kinds of barriers they may face during the hiring process. Whelpley and colleagues found that a common topic revolved around the disclosure of an autism diagnosis.

Further, they included four main areas where autistic candidates felt there were barriers: (1) job performance quality; (2) focus on the autistic diagnosis rather than the candidate as a person; (3) ignorance from the interviewer; and (4) unequal treatment concerns. Interestingly, participants who did disclose a diagnosis reported that afterward, the interview seemed to

shift to the diagnosis and less on the candidate as an individual.

### **Methodological Issues in ASD Research**

There is a significant methodological concern in ASD workforce research. One critical issue in the literature involving the discussion of ASD is the lack of published research on the topic of adults with ASD in general. According to a 2013 meta-analysis of approximately 1,217 publications involving adults, only 13 studies met the criteria for high methodological quality (Howlin, 2013). This significant gap in the literature is crucial to fill as the autistic population ages. Moreover, there is a gap in organizational research focused on management. For instance, diversity hiring programs, or support programs to assist the transition into/back to employment (e.g., vocational rehabilitation) (Vancouver Coastal Health, 2025). Literature that does exist on organizations is either taken from general psychology or focuses on how autism is a disability (Whelpley et al., 2021).

The populations that are studied are often not representative of the general autistic population. Many of the studies that were mentioned in the literature review had extremely small sample sizes. Moreover, most participants were White/Caucasian and received higher education (Anderson et al., 2020). However, this is not the reality for many autistic individuals who are entering the workforce. Roux and colleagues (2013) collected data from Wave 5 of the National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 (NLTS2). This survey focused on American young adults, aged 21-25, who received special education services in high school and looked specifically at their employment histories. Their results showed that 53.4% of young adults with ASD had never received pay from work outside the home since leaving high school (Roux et al., 2013). This is the lowest rate among other disability groups.

Additionally, they received less compensation than other groups. Roux and colleagues (2013) conclude that those with ASD may find it more challenging to transition from high school to finding employment shortly after graduating. This lack of adult-focused research has hindered our understanding of how hiring

decisions are made depending on whether a candidate explicitly states they have a diagnosis, a need or neither. Furthermore, we know less about how employers respond to these needs (Samtleben, 2024).

In their response to Vivanti (2020)'s editorial on person-first (person with autism) versus identity-first language (autistic person), Botha and colleagues (2021) highlight critical methodological issues related to the representation of individuals with ASD in ASD research. Additionally, while ASD individuals do engage with research (e.g., participating in a survey), they are often deemed "not autistic enough" to be qualified, and those who have higher communication support needs are kept out of research entirely (Botha et al., 2021). Vivanti (2020) is critiqued for implying that being more able equates to being less autistic. This is problematic because it assumes that autism is a linear scale in terms of severity. The assumptions of abilities of "high-functioning" or "low-functioning" ASD individuals can further influence employer perceptions. An increase in awareness of different qualities of autistic individuals will help to decrease these assumptions.

Present research lacks the understanding of how autistic candidates are perceived in the hiring process. Whelpley and May (2023) lay the necessary groundwork by examining how physical and behavioural cues influence interviewer evaluations. However, their focus on visible traits poses a challenge, as autism is often considered an "invisible" disability, and not all autistic traits are outwardly expressed. As such, non-visible factors, such as language framing and diagnostic disclosure, may be just as influential. To address this gap, the present paper adopts a theoretical lens, using impression formation and language framing. These perspectives help explain why disclosure matters and how the mere mention of a diagnosis during an interview can significantly impact the opportunity for the candidate.

### **Discussion & Future Recommendations**

As the number of ASD diagnoses increases (Statistics Canada, 2019), it is more important

than ever to accommodate different needs regarding employment. The present paper examined how diagnostic language framing may influence hiring decisions for autistic candidates through Asch's (1946) impression formation theory. Although studies do exist based on discrimination against those with ASD, there is a significant gap in research, notably on employment struggles. Impressions are formed as quickly as in 1/10th of a second (Willis & Todorov, 2006). When a diagnostic label is included in a candidate's resume, it may trigger biases even before they speak at the interview. Some studies, such as McMahon (2025), suggest that disclosure of an autism diagnosis can improve impressions, increasing understanding and openness. However, employers or evaluators often see the diagnosis before the individual (Norris et al., 2024).

The Canadian Academy of Health Sciences (CAHS) (2022) developed a pyramid model outlining the various levels of employment support. The levels, beginning with the bottom tier, are as follows: (1) Skills and specific strategies (e.g., assistive technology); (2) Program components (e.g., job coaching); (3) Service models (e.g., transition planning); (4) Packaged interventions (e.g., supported employment); (5) Policy approaches (e.g., anti-discrimination legislation). CAHS (2022) provides seven principles of supported employment, including wages, strengths, systems changes, and self-determination. By integrating these principles, alongside the pyramid model, employers can continue strengthening their employment demands and

opportunities to better suit individuals with autism.

Future research should investigate the present review's question, including hiring biases and barriers, through collaboration with neurodivergent communities. Additionally, research on this topic will benefit from larger-scale replications with more diverse samples. Howlin (2013) highlighted the lack of adult-focused research around autism in general (not exclusively employment-focused). Pellicano and colleagues (2014) conducted a systematic study, surveying different focus groups (including adults with ASD, family members, practitioners, and researchers) on what autism research should focus on in the United Kingdom. These focus groups called for more research for services and supports, research logistics, as well as knowledge about autism in general. Moreover, the inclusion of the autistic community should be prioritized to ensure that resources are being distributed where it is most needed.

Longitudinal studies should also be conducted to examine hiring outcomes based on whether the candidate discloses a diagnosis. It may also be beneficial to include studies about workplace policies and to evaluate hiring equity laws (e.g. Employment Equity Act (EEA)) (Employment Equity Act, 1995). In particular, it is important to assess the EEA's positive and negative contributions to employment outcomes for autistic individuals since its implementation. Overall, increased understanding of how disclosure influences impression formation during hiring can reduce stigma and improve equity for autistic job candidates.

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