**Perceptions of autistic and non-autistic adults in employment interviews: the role of behavioral impression management and interview structure**

The current study aimed investigate the extent to which mock employers’ impressions of candidates is affected by Impression Management (IM) by assessing: 1) the impact of observable (para-verbal and non-verbal) IM in a group with known social communication differences, comparing ratings of autistic and non-autistic interviewees answering standard, unadapted employment interview questions, viewed either via video recordings (where behavioral differences are available) or interview transcripts (where behavioral differences are less apparent); and 2) differences in raters’ overall impressions of autistic candidates from a video-recorded interview when questions were adapted to be more structured (whereby verbal IM is supported, and para- and non-verbal IM is thought to be less influential during structured compared to unstructured interviews).

# Study 1: Method

## Design

The first study investigated the impact of behavioral differences, as assessed by viewing format (transcript vs. video) on rater participants’ overall impressions of autistic and non-autistic candidates during a mock employment interview (i.e., with standard, unadapted questions). This was assessed utilizing a 2 (Group: autistic vs. non-autistic) × 2 (Format: transcript vs. video) mixed design, whereby Format was within-participants.

## Rater Participants

Rater participants were recruited utilizing the researchers’ professional contacts (within the employment industry), via departmental participant databases, and via social media, so that a minimum of two rater participants rated each stimuli pair (see Procedure). Raters were targeted for recruitment on the basis of being likely to have had some prior experience of interviewing people in an employment context, and that they would also be unlikely to know or guess (e.g., by knowing the researcher) that this study was related to autism research. Participants were recruited if they spoke English fluently, had normal or corrected-to-normal vision and hearing, and did not work or study at the University of Bath or at University College London at the time of participation (to protect stimuli participant anonymity). Data for three rater participants were removed from the analyses for the following reasons: participant data entry error meant it was not possible to determine which format of the interview the participant was rating (N = 1); the participant had technical issues whilst watching the video (loss of audio; N = 1); it was unclear whether the participant had viewed and rated both stimuli (N = 1). Further, there were an uneven number of raters for each format combination (e.g., three ratings for the transcript, but four for the video) for six stimuli pairs (i.e., 12 interviewees) – the most recent rater’s participation was removed in each of these cases.

The final sample included 90 rater participants aged 20-71 years (*M* = 39.97, *SD* = 14.50), who rated themselves on average 3.51 on a six-point scale asking, *“How experienced do you consider yourself to be at interviewing other people?”* (*SD* = 1.71).[[1]](#footnote-1) The majority of participants took part remotely online (N = 69), with 21 participants completing the study at the lab at the University of Bath (total raters N = 90; 51 female, and 39 male). Participants also completed some brief scales to provide an index of their autism knowledge (Autism Awareness Scale; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015)[[2]](#footnote-2), experience with autistic people (Level of Contact Scale; Gardiner & Iarocci, 2014; Holmes et al., 1999; Morrison et al., 2019), and stigma against autistic people (Social Distance Scale; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015), with average scores within the range of prior studies with non-autistic raters (e.g., Morrison et al., 2019; see Table 1).

*Table 1.* Rater participant demographics

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| --- | --- |
| Demographic factors | Rater participants (N = 90) |
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| Gender | 51 female, 39 male |
| Age (years) | *M* = 39.97, (*SD* = 14.50), range = 20-71 |
| Interviewing experience (0-6 scale rating) | *M* = 3.51 (*SD* = 1.71), range = 0-6 |
| Autism Awareness Scale (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015) | *M* = 11.94, *SD* = 4.08, range = 2-22 |
| Level of Contact Scale (Gardiner & Iarocci, 2014; Holmes et al., 1999; Morrison et al., 2019) | *M* = 6.37, *SD* = 2.85, range = 1-12 |
| Social Distance Scale (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015) | *M* = 9.53, *SD* = 3.18, range = 6–18 |

## Interviewees in the mock employment interviews

Interviews were obtained in a previous study investigating employers’ ratings of autistic and non-autistic participants’ performances during unadapted and adapted mock employment interviews (Maras et al., 2020b). Briefly, in the first phase of the study reported in Maras et al. (2020b), autistic and non-autistic adults participated in mock employment interviews, answering standard (*unadapted*) employment interview questions. In the second phase, interviewees returned to answer a different set of *adapted* interview questions (question sets were counterbalanced between phases).

The interviews were audio-video recorded and transcribed, and stimuli pairs were created for the current study by randomly pairing an autistic participant’s stimuli with another autistic participant’s stimuli (one video, one transcript), and a non-autistic participant’s stimuli with another non-autistic participant’s stimuli (one video, one transcript), such that each rater participant rated one interview transcript and one video from the same participant group (autistic or non-autistic). Six stimuli pairs (12 participants) were excluded from the current study: autistic participants disclosed their diagnosis during the interview (N = 4) and at least one participant from the pair did not return for the part 2 interview (Maras et al., 2020; N = 8). Transcript and video stimuli were therefore available for 14 autistic and 18 non-autistic interviewee participants. Autistic and non-autistic interviewees did not differ significantly in terms of age or IQ, but as expected, the autistic group had significantly higher scores on the Autism Spectrum Quotient (AQ), measuring levels of autistic traits (80% specificity for AQ; Baron-Cohen et al., 2001) see Table 1 in Appendix 1). All original study materials are available in Supplementary Materials at (Maras et al., 2020).

## Procedure

The study was hosted on the Qualtrics online questionnaire platform. Participants were informed that the interviewees they were rating had been completing a mock employment interview as part of a study. They rated their overall impressions of each interviewee (after watching the video or reading the transcript of the interview) on a 5-point scale (ranging from ‘not at all’ to ‘extremely’) on nine aspects: confidence, motivation, knowledgeability, conscientiousness, competence, intelligence, communication skills, likeability, and how easy they would be to work with. These constructs were identified as crucial factors upon which employers base their ratings of interviewees (Huffcutt, 2011; see also Salgado & Moscoso, 2002; Smith et al., 2014) and were also utilized in the Maras et al. (2020) study. Rater participants received secure links to one anonymized, group-blinded transcript and video file from the unadapted interviews, and a Qualtrics survey link for inputting demographic information and ratings for each interview. Participants either rated a pair of autistic interviewees, or a pair of non-autistic interviewees, with viewing order counterbalanced between video and transcript formats. After completing the ratings, participants were asked questions about their autism knowledge, experience, and stigma. A minimum of two rater participants rated each stimulus (this applied to three stimuli pairs; the rest had three raters). Participation took 30-45 minutes, and participants were reimbursed £8 for their time.

# Study 2: Method

## Design

Study 2 assessed the impact of interview structure (standard, unadapted employment interview questions vs. adapted interview questions) on participants’ overall impressions of autistic candidates from videos of the interviews. A between-subjects design was used; data for participants rating an autistic participant in unadapted interviews were collected during Study 1, and new participants were recruited to rate autistic participants in adapted interviews. The dependent variable was raters’ quantitative scale ratings of their impression of the interviewees, measured on nine aspects of overall performance (see Procedure for details).

## Rater Participants

An additional ninety-four (68 females, 26 males) new rater participants (not involved in Study 1), who were likely to have some prior experience of interviewing, were recruited to rate the adapted interview videos for non-autistic and autistic candidates[[3]](#footnote-3), utilizing the same recruitment methods and inclusion criteria as in Study 1. A minimum of two participants rated each stimulus. Forty two of the raters were allocated an autistic candidate (blind to group); 27 females and 15 males aged 23-75 years (*M* = 46.76, *SD* = 15.84). As in Study 1, most participants had interviewing experience in an employment or related context[[4]](#footnote-4). Participants completed the study online, and also completed the brief scales indexing knowledge, experience, and perceptions of autism: Autism Awareness Scale: *M* = 12.74, *SD* = 4.91, range = 0-21; Level of Contact Scale: *M* = 6.67, *SD* = 3.08, range = 1-12; Social Distance Scale: *M* = 9.55, *SD* = 3.98, range = 6–21, with average scores within the range of prior studies (e.g., Morrison et al., 2019).

## Procedure

The study was hosted on the Qualtrics online questionnaire platform. After watching a video of an interview, participants rated their overall impressions of the candidate on the same nine aspects of their performance as in Study 1. Participants received a secure link to one anonymized, group-blinded video of an adapted interview, as well as a Qualtrics survey link for inputting their ratings and demographic information. Participants were informed that the interviewee they were rating had been completing a mock employment interview as part of a study. Three participants rated each video, apart from two videos which were rated by two participants. After completing the ratings, participants were asked questions about their autism knowledge, experience, and stigma. Participation took around 30 minutes, and participants were reimbursed £8 for their time.

## Ethical considerations

All participants provided informed written or online consent to take part and were fully debriefed after completing the study. Ethical approval was obtained from the Psychology Research Ethics Committee at the University of Bath. Before participating, rater participants agreed that should they recognize an interviewee from the transcripts or videos that they must stop watching or reading immediately and inform the researcher. Rater participants were also advised that the interviews were strictly confidential, and explicitly instructed not to download nor distribute the interview transcripts or videos, nor discuss the content of the interviews with anyone outside of the research team.

1. Six participants rated themselves as ‘0’, with one of the six answering ‘yes’ to a question about having interviewing experience. Removing these participants from the analyses did not affect the direction nor significance of the analyses, therefore their data were included. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. We removed item 13; "People with autism have empathy" due to debate regarding this issue (see, e.g., Fletcher-Watson & Bird, 2020; Milton, 2012) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Although original data collection was conducted for both autistic and non-autistic candidates, only data for autistic candidates is analysed in the current study, since the focus here is on the comparison between autistic candidates’ performance during standard, unadapted questions and questions adapted to be more structured and supportive. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. One participant rated themselves as ‘0’ for the question “how experienced do you consider yourself to be at interviewing other people?”, but this is likely an error as this participant also answered ‘yes’ to having employment interviewing experience. In addition, one rater stated that they did not have such experience, but provided a score of 1 for their level of interviewing experience, and another reported having interviewing experience in a healthcare setting, rating their interviewing experience as 3. All data were included in the analyses. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)