

Becoming an autistic adult: exploring the transitions of young people with autism from education/care to working life

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1. The Question/Problem

Within disability studies a central theme is the study of the processes that create the person as 'disabled'. Work is seen as a central process in the transition to adulthood (Holmqvist, 2008). To stand outside the ordinary labour market means to be more dependent on social interventions, less involved or integrated into society and to remain outside the social status and self-identity it means to have work (Holmqvist, 2008). Leaving school and moving out from ones parent's home into a home of ones own is therefore a significant milestone in young people's lives. However, the transition from school is more complex for disabled young people (Murray, 2007) and research evidence suggests that transition to adulthood is the beginning of lifelong inequalities and difficulties faced by adults with autism. Transition for young people with autism is further complicated because of the often hidden nature of the disability (Adreon & Durocher, 2007).

Several studies within the growing field of autism and work life have shown that individuals with autism, despite great potential, have found it difficult to find and keep a job that is commensurate with their abilities and managing social relationships in the workplace (Hendricks, 2010). Impediments to a successful working life can be a lack of awareness of people with autism's specific needs and characteristics of employers and workplaces, with a general lack of strategies that promote success (Smith-Myles & Smith, 2007). Several studies therefore stress the importance of both education, special support and special employment opportunities (job and task-matching) for people with autism to enable them to get and keep a job (see for example Hendricks, 2010). Within autism research inspired by Disability Studies, an internationally growing field of research that is referred to as a critical autism studies, examines how autism and people with autism are related to different types of social barriers, such as discrimination (see for example Baker, 2008), and various forms of social exclusion (see for example Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, 2012). A central concept is neurodiversity and an emphasis on the importance of neurodiversity from a critical perspective. In line with the social model of disability, the starting point is that autism is to be seen as manifestations of neurological diversity rather than a deficiency that should be cured/corrected.

2. The Method

In this paper we draw on our previous and ongoing research on neurodiverse spaces for children and adults with autism. A key way in which people with autism are getting their voices heard is through new technologies, particularly via the Internet and an increasing number of people with autism are using the Internet as a forum for self-advocacy (see for example Dekker 2000; Ward & Meyer 1999). The focus of the paper is to draw on an understanding of autism as neurodiversity to document the experiences of young people with autism, their parents/carers and families and professionals involved in the processes of transitions to young adulthood with a special focus of transition into worklife.

3. Policy Implications

The implications for refocusing an examination on transitions into work by people with autism through a lens of neurodiversity are far reaching in terms of how people with autism fashion their own positive identities and how service providers negotiate opportunities for some, and how workplaces shift in terms of accommodating difference.

4. The Findings

The findings indicate that alternative representations of autism may lead to more call for inclusive and diverse workspaces, where the strengths of some adults with autism can be integrated into a shared neurodiverse and neurotypical space.

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