

Early Career Psychologist Column

Disability Accessibility of Careers in Psychology: Experiences shared from Neurodivergent Early Career Professionals



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Experiences for early career professionals (ECPs) in psychology are often focused on high-stakes networking and professional development to prepare for a competitive job market. Hidden within this talent pool, the number of psychology ECPs in academia with a disability is unknown. An average of 9.2% doctoral students applying for the Association of Psychology Postdoctoral and Internship Centers (APPIC) internships in psychology self-identify as having a disability (Andrews & Lund, 2015; Lund, 2021). While disability status in psychology trainees is an area of research with growing representation, little is known about trainees' experiences after graduation, especially ECPs who identify as neurodivergent or autistic. This may be due to lack of representation of neurodivergent faculty in psychology or due to underreporting and lack of disclosure by professionals (Lund, 2021). Neurodivergent ECPs seeking academic jobs may encounter barriers when networking, interviewing, and after obtaining jobs. With the goal to reduce the loss of talent, this column reflects on the experiences of neurodivergent ECPs with recommendations and reflections for applicants and hiring committees.

Five autistic ECPs were interviewed about their experiences searching for academic jobs. These included a Ph.D. candidate,

postdoctoral researcher, post-graduate professional, and teaching faculty member. Two ECPs were willing to disclose names and neurodivergent status; the other three remained anonymous/first name only, providing indirect evidence that autistic ECPs may not be comfortable disclosing their status.

Autistic ECPs' experiences in seeking jobs
Autistic interviewees expressed anxiety about professional expectations, which may be compounded by their social disabilities. These candidates expressed fear that disability disclosure on job applications would result in bias about their eligibility, and they shared uncertainty surrounding 'unspoken rules' about disclosure. Morgan, an autistic ECP, described their experiences well, including how the process led to procrastination and intense pursuit. An important message is that job advertisements that included a diversity mission generally miss the opportunity to explicitly include disabled scholars, leading neurodivergent candidates to fear disclosure and camouflage to fit a neurotypical expectation of faculty members. This may result in a loss of talent when neurodivergent candidates' potential to display all of their talents is stifled, including ones that intersect with their lived experiences.

"This is likely related to my autism but at the

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beginning I felt overwhelmed. I avoided doing job market work... This feeling of overwhelm was/is compounded by the prospect of leaving an institution where I feel valued and respected and not knowing how the next place will be across multiple dimensions (e.g., inclusion and acceptance, collaborative opportunities, institutional resources, promotion expectations, living environments). After submitting the first two applications and getting over my inertia and difficulty with initiation, I got into a rhythm. Applying to jobs soon became my central (only) interest. I couldn't easily switch away from applying. I went from being completely overwhelmed to applying to over 25 schools in just 1-2 weeks. In the same month, I got my first two interviews.

... I have a lot of thoughts and feelings about [diversity] missions, and especially jobs that explicitly state their interest in recruiting marginalized scholars along multiple identities, inclusive of disability. First, I think it is a good step that schools appear to be taking actions to improve diversity. Second, I don't trust that schools are thinking about disability when they post those statements. Some searches target Black or POC scholars, and that is valid; I am happy to see it. Some searches appear to be broader, and even list disability as an identity of interest, but I still do not trust those searches as truly wanting a disabled scholar. Third, it is a huge professional risk to disclose disability. We know that disabled people face considerable discrimination in the workforce. Therefore, there could be unintended consequences of these diversity statements for disabled scholars, who might falsely believe that disclosing will have no downsides and possibly even an advantage.

... Right now, the biggest challenge is not knowing the facts. I don't know what schools think of me. I don't know what opportunities are truly open to me. It feels like there is an element of poker that will intensify in coming months; I don't like this feeling. I combat this feeling by doing everything I shouldn't when playing poker. I keep my cards face up on the

table, sort of speak. I don't want to play. I just want to be efficiently matched to my future job." - Morgan

Autistic ECPs' experiences with interviews

When it came to the interviews, disability disclosure was a major theme, and ECPs faced a risky decision to disclose as a way to gauge employers' responses. Openness to accommodations during the interview provided a litmus test for how employers would accommodate disabilities if the ECP was hired and if employers were serious about their diversity mission. Speaking with Scott Frasard and two anonymous ECPs regarding job interviews highlighted this theme.

"In my experience of disclosing that I'm autistic at the outset, I may get a phone call for an interview from some companies - about two-thirds of them, so I do think there's gatekeeping that still goes on to exclude people who are different, maybe subconsciously or maybe out of not really understanding autism. When I interview after my [late] autism diagnosis, yeah, they're interviewing me, but I'm also interviewing them. I ask more questions now than before - questions like their commitment to diversity." - Dr. Scott Frasard, President and CEO of Frasard Consulting

"I should say that I don't know that I have the same ability to reach out to folks for help in the way that maybe a neurotypical person would. I'm a very extroverted person and a very engaging person. But when it comes to asking for help, historically, that has been something that I have paid for dearly. I don't feel comfortable disclosing my disability status. In the initial application, they all now ask, and I prefer not to disclose. I'm afraid that if I check I don't have a disability that I won't be able to have accommodations later on." - Anonymous

"In order to survive an interview, many of us would absolutely have to disclose and ask for accommodations, but on the other hand, as

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one of my colleagues said, 'you really want to be someplace where that's a problem?' If you can't disclose and you can't ask for accommodations at the interview, what's it going to be like to try to get accommodations and support after you're on the job? I always operate from a point of view of disclosure. It doesn't work for everyone, but I don't have a choice. I'm too extroverted...The best way to get a position, if you can and in my field of work (academia), is to not have to interview. The best way to get the position is to network intensively with intentionality at national or international conferences and make a point of meeting those people who are speaking... They get to hear how your brain works and whether it could be of value. Ideally, if you've done enough of that networking and be a part of these projects, people start to invite you to participate in things, and that's what's happened to me. I'm facing ageism now as well as ableism, but I also don't think my strategies are a bad idea for anybody, you just have to be brave." - Anonymous

An autistic ECP's experience after being hired

Once hired, social expectations suited for neurotypical scholars may inadvertently create exclusionary practices that nullify institutional diversity missions. A teaching faculty member, Dr. Christopher Wyatt, shared insightful details about HR's role in communicating with academic departments and administrators about providing requested accommodations and acknowledging that there are pedagogical practices common in academia that result in discrimination against neurodivergent and disabled scholars.

"I find myself trying to educate HR, department chairs, and deans because what becomes problematic in temporary positions or in the junior faculty positions are some of the expectations placed on new and potential hires to be socially engaged in ways that autistics might struggle with. Some examples include being told that junior faculty or lecturers will share a common area...The required attendance at events and social functions has also been mentioned. They

want you at convocations. They want you at graduations. They want you at award dinners and ceremonies. They expect you to lead student groups. Those are things that I have found challenging, and they are on the 10-year checklist, and when I have raised that this is something that is a problem for me in terms of sensory input, there is not a level of understanding that's there...The fact that there are very few tenured autistics outside of the sciences doesn't surprise me. It's very difficult to be socially engaged at conferences, panels, and social events that many departments insist upon. When those issues are raised in hiring, it is difficult to answer honestly knowing what the eventual outcome can be. Though HR will say we can't discriminate and will be inclusive, those are nice things to say but are seldom practiced. The problem with HR, as they have checklists of what to expect for autistics, is that it doesn't really work well since every one of us has different needs and different comorbidities... A thinking usually is -- Well, you're a horrible example of how we want our students to be -- the very teaching pedagogies that we're expected to model are flawed pedagogies. We're expected to model erroneous pedagogical practices. When we don't do that, that becomes problematic during the interview and if we try to explain them, what is really happening is the committee then is demanding disclosure. You know, why are you looking down? Why are you not sitting straight? Why is your arm shaking? Why do you look so nervous? Many other autistics have comorbid conditions. I have a neurological disorder that causes tremors. I have actually been told to calm down because I was shaking slightly. I also was tapping a cane and I was told that it was distracting. So being disabled in both the physical and neurological sense, you find very quickly that you're not fit for the departments that have expectations of perfect examples of teaching. Of course, none of those individuals in the room judging you are, but they certainly want to hold you to that standard as an incoming faculty." - Dr. Christopher Wyatt

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Suggestions on supports for neurodivergent ECPs

Based on the review of 25 psychology job advertisements in 2021 and the perspective of neurodivergent ECPs we interviewed, we offer some recommendations. A diversity statement was provided in 92% of job advertisements reviewed, the clear majority, but there is room for improvement. A diversity statement would ideally be linked to the institution's diversity mission (found in only 16% of advertisements reviewed). Only 64% of advertisements specifically mentioned disabilities or diversity of abilities, and none mentioned neurodiversity. While some advertisements provided broader statements, such as "encourages individuals of diverse backgrounds to apply," others specifically list certain diverse groups, such as "linguistically, culturally, or ethnically diverse backgrounds" or "diverse identities based on gender, race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation." Listing some groups but not others (i.e., people with disabilities, neurodiversity) limit inclusivity and may discourage marginalized individuals from applying. Several advertisements noted that disabled individuals who were "qualified" for the job would be considered -- a caveat not mentioned related to other populations. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (1973) require institutions to provide accommodations for students, staff, and faculty with disabilities. This begs the question: *Does the ADA and Section 504 extend to ECP job candidates with disabilities in providing accommodations during the job search and interview?* As neurodiverse graduate students move into the next phase of their training, they are faced with unclear messaging from college administrators and departments about disability accommodations. Only 24% of job advertisements reviewed included information about acquiring accommodations during the application and interview process. Asking for accommodations is a stressor for job applicants and employees. Providing statements about how to access accommodations during the application process demonstrates an organization's commitment to supporting applicants and employees of all abilities. Easing the burden of accessing reasonable accommodations

creates an equitable and inclusive interview/hiring process allowing applicants and employers alike to best represent themselves and their work.

Reflections of neurodivergent interviewees highlighted their need for mentorship during the job search process and early career phase. This can help individuals navigate their new career, including professionally, in terms of improving self-advocacy skills and in accessing accommodations. While mentorship may be offered by individuals without disabilities, mentors with disabilities may be preferred due to concerns surrounding discrimination and disclosure. National committees, such as the American Psychological Association's Disability Mentoring Program, can be a good resource for students and professionals with a disability entering the field of psychology. Unfortunately, local or institution-specific disability mentorship programs rarely target neurodiverse academics.

Finally, disability representation on job search and DEI committees is needed across institutions to help identify and endorse neurodiverse job candidates. Recognition of neurodiversity as a form of diversity, ongoing dedication, and the promotion of disability-affirming principles can help reduce barriers for neurodiverse job candidates in psychology. *"I would say that most neurodivergent people that I know would love nothing more than a predictable role that they could come in and out of every day for decades. And it really comes down to accommodations. It comes down to strengths-based leadership as opposed to gaps-based leadership. If I could wave a magic wand and tell employers and leaders one thing, it would be to drop the idea of trying to get people to do better the things that they don't do well. And then as far as neurodivergent workers, we already exist. Just management leadership don't know that they're divergent. Every single organization under the sun right now has a neurodiverse workforce, and every one of them is coming to me saying how can I get a neurodiverse workforce. You have it already, and it's a matter of making it so that there's allowed to be diversity of thought around the table because people are allowed to be authentically themselves without repercussions."* – Anonymous