

Exploring Culture, Safety and Comfort: Experiences of Autistic Researchers with Autistic Participants in a Longitudinal Interview Study.

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Method Article

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Abstract

Background:

Being an “insider” in a research context presents benefits and challenges. However, the unique experiences of Autistic Autism researchers are rarely explored within the research literature.

Objective:

To describe and reflect on a group of Autistic Autism researchers’ experiences, which include both research practices and relationships developed with participants. To use this analysis to provide recommendations for Autistic Autism researchers, enabling safety and comfort in their working practices.

Methods:

The AM2M study is a longitudinal, Autistic-led, creative methods facilitated study. The study’s four Autistic postdoctoral researchers were asked questions about, and used their field notes to reflect on, both being Autistic in Autism research and working with Autistic participants. Data were analysed thematically. Themes and recommendations were discussed with the research team until consensus was achieved.

Discussion:

Autistic researchers often face unique barriers to conducting research. Our team ensured accommodations were made for our Autistic participants and implemented changes to our own working practices to improve safety and comfort. In doing so, we moved away from neuronormative academic practices. Recommendations to encourage Autistic researchers to flourish in academic environments focus on what Autistic researchers can do, alongside managers and funders.

Introduction

Autistic Participants

Historically, in Autism research, Autistic people have not been given as much power in decision-making processes as non-Autistic individuals (Pellicano et al., 2022). Autistic people have reported feeling undermined in their autonomy in research, reporting tokenistic involvement (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2018), rather than being worked *with* collaboratively as co-researchers (Jackson, 2021). The lack of involvement from Autistic people themselves in designing Autism studies may have impacted the type of research undertaken, and the narratives created surrounding Autism, neurodivergence, and disability

(Dwyer et al., 2021). Over the last few decades, there has been increased advocacy for more neurodiversity-affirming, participatory approaches to be adopted in research (Bertilsson Rosqvist et al., 2025), with guidelines published to facilitate this (Nicolaidis et al., 2019).

There has been a paradigm shift from the medical model of Autism, which focuses on individuals' deficits and care which centres normalisation (Zaks, 2024), towards a social model of Autism, which argues that systematic barriers and social attitudes contribute towards disablement (Woods, 2017). This has arguably led to the increased involvement of Autistic people in research, creating meaningful changes for the community (Jones, 2021; Den Houting et al., 2021). Involving Autistic people as co-producers and collaborators in research (Tan et al., 2024), has led to, arguably, more of the community's priorities being attended to (Chown et al., 2017) as well as increased neurodiversity-affirming practices within research, such as a reduction in pathologising language (Botha and Cage, 2022). However, it is less common to find papers which discuss the views and experiences of Autistic researchers themselves.

Autistic Autism Researchers

Research on the experiences of Autistic people working successfully in academia tends to focus on students, with less of a focus on academic staff (Jones, 2022). Experiences of Autistic people's careers has only recently been explored in the research literature (Donaghy and Linkiewicz, 2024). Arguably, Autistic researchers can offer a critical insight into Autism research, shaped through both their lived experience, and academic knowledge (Goetz and Adams, 2024). Autistic researchers may therefore better understand the needs of their community and commit themselves to meeting these needs (Dwyer et al., 2021; Haar et al., 2024). Grant and Kara (2021) also highlight how some Autistic traits may align well with the skills required to undertake research, such as the ability to hyperfocus, attention to detail, and creative thinking.

However, there may also be challenges for Autistic researchers working in the field of Autism. For all researchers, regardless of their neurotype, there is a risk involved when working with sensitive topics to which a researcher has a personal connection (Stahlke, 2018). Unanticipated disclosures and the discussion of uncomfortable topics may lead to exhaustion and burnout in researchers (Mallon and Elliot, 2019). Autistic Autism researchers may experience an additional emotional and mental toll due to working within a field in which they have personal experience (Donaghy and Linkiewicz, 2024). Autistic academics often work within academic spaces which are deficit-based in their narrative (Bertilsson Rosqvist et al., 2023) and may experience criticism, or feel pressure, about accurately representing the breadth of the Autistic community (Bertilsson Rosqvist et al., 2019b; Milton, 2025). This additional cognitive load is an example of minority stress (Botha and Frost, 2020). In addition, researchers themselves may not have access to reasonable adjustments, nor have the freedom to be non-conformist in their approach, further compounding this stress (Kerschbaum and Price, 2017). Because of potential barriers such as ignorance and stigma, Autistic academics may choose not to share their identity (Jones, 2023). There is little known about the disclosure practices of Autistic people in employment (Sreckovic et al., 2023), as sharing one's Autistic identity in the workplace is a personal choice based on multiple

contextual factors, including the likelihood of facing prejudice and potential job security (Romualdez et al., 2021).

Arguably, there are unique experiences Autistic Autism researchers may face. An Autistic researcher will experience both the insider and outsider status when working with other Autistic people (Louis and Bartunek, 1992). They are ‘insiders’ in that they are Autistic and may share commonalities because of this, but also ‘outsiders’ in that they likely have not had the same background or lived experience as their participants. Dramaturgy, a sociological concept, explores the interactions between people (‘actors’) within their daily lives, considering how they behave with different groups of people and the impressions they make (Goffman, 1959). Within dramaturgy, Goffman (1959) outlines how actors have a ‘front stage’, where they are performing a public-facing role, which has often been curated. Whereas the ‘backstage’ is a more private space where actors can be their true selves. Autistic people, like all people, monitor how they interact and behave with others. Masking, as described within a neurodivergent-specific context, has parallels with the concept of front and backstage (Milton, 2025). Masking is a well-documented concept within the academic and activist literature to date (see Fox-Muraton, 2025; Hull et al., 2017; Pearson & Rose, 2021; Radulski, 2022). Masking, also described as ‘passing’ or ‘covering’ within Goffman’s work (1963), focuses on individuals who have a ‘spoiled identity’ which refers to how stigma renders an individual undesirable (Goffman, 1963, p.14) within a neuronormative context. We theorise that Autistic researchers may feel pressure to match neuronormative expectations. In doing so, Autistic researchers may experience negative impacts from masking including confused self-identity, exhaustion, and burnout (Pearson and Rose, 2021).

Autistic Researchers with Autistic Participants

Autistic people demonstrably have effective communication skills when conversing with other Autistic people (Crompton et al., 2020b), to a similar level of success as non-Autistic people in same-neurotype situations (Crompton et al., 2025). This demonstrates a mutual understanding not impacted by the double empathy problem, which argues difficulties in cross-neurotype communication is reciprocal, rather than an Autistic deficit (Milton, 2012). Accordingly, researchers and participants sharing an Autistic identity will inevitably influence the relationships built, data collected, and the presentation of results (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, 2025). For example, Autistic researchers who work with Autistic participants may encounter the “*epistemic privilege*” of shared understanding, alongside the recognition that Autistic experiences are varied and shaped by intersectional identities (Pellicano, 2022). Autistic researchers can arguably uniquely inform their research choices using both good practice guidelines (Raymaker and Nicolaidis, 2013) and lived experience (Jones, 2021), therefore supporting a better understanding of community needs and the shaping of research accordingly (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al., 2025). However, it is key for researchers to be cognisant of their insider status.

Autistic people who were previously disenfranchised with research may be more likely to re-engage with projects which involve Autistic interviewers (Pellicano, 2021), especially when these are combined with flexible, less conventional research practices (Pellicano, 2022). Communication styles between Autistic

participants and their researchers may be similar, with Autistic researchers incorporating a more relational communication style, having interest-based exchanges (Bertilsson Rosqvist, 2019a), and focusing on sharing thoughts and experiences in a reciprocal manner, rather than in a one-way exchange (Chen et al., 2021). Teams of Autistic researchers may have enhanced consideration for the alternative communication and processing methods people may use and therefore may offer a range of accessible ways in which participants can engage in the research process (Jones, 2021). The experiences of Autistic researchers working with Autistic participants is a rarely explored topic; one recent exception discusses Autistic friendly interview spaces (Hedlund et al., 2026).

The aim of this article is to reflect on the unique experiences of Autistic researchers working with Autistic participants in a longitudinal interview study. We describe and reflect on our experiences, both within our research practices and in our relationships with participants, alongside providing recommendations for Autistic researchers to consider when shaping their research projects.

Methods

The (AM2M) study

The AM2M study is a longitudinal study with a fully Autistic team, comprising the principal investigator, four research assistants, and a community council of 11 lay Autistic people. AM2M is a prospectively registered (Grant et al., 2024a), longitudinal study, and consists of up to 10 qualitative interviews with 100 Autistic Assigned Female and Birth (AFAB) people over the course of five years. The study incorporates the principles of Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), where community members and academic researchers collaborate to develop (Grant et al., 2024b) and design research (Williams et al., 2024), following existing guidance (Nicolaidis et al., 2019). We intend to work with participants using a person-centred ethical approach. This involves accommodating individual needs, developing trust so that participants feel comfortable sharing (Algeo, 2012), respecting a person's individuality, and aiming to reduce the power dynamic between participants and interviewers (Cascio, Weiss and Racine, 2020). Participants were offered an "opt-in" approach to data sharing, in which they could decide if they wanted their anonymised data shared with future researchers.

The study incorporates various modes of engagement and flexibility in its methodology, for example offering participants the use of creative preparation tools to plan their interviews, and remote interviewing, to create a safe, individualised environment (Dembele et al., 2024). This approach contrasts with interviews facilitated by a semi-structured interview guide and can involve more management on the part of the researcher (Mannay, 2015). Before their first interview, researchers met with each participant in a 1–1 "onboarding" meeting to discuss what would help them be comfortable whilst participating in the study. This included the mode of interview (examples include synchronous vs. asynchronous, video or audio only), how to support them when distressed, asking if they needed reminders to attend interviews, and identifying any topics they did not wish to discuss ahead of time.

Positionality Statement

As a team, we all identify as neurodivergent and we were all identified as female at birth. Some of us identify as disabled. We are all Autistic with a mixture of social positions, lived experiences, racial and cultural backgrounds, and interests, which shape how we interact with our participants. However, as a collective, we are committed to neurodiversity-affirming, trans-inclusive research which involves and improves the lives of our fellow Autistic and wider neurodivergent communities.

Reflective process

(Author 1) and (Author 5) met together to consider the literature in this area and to draft a series of questions. These were then discussed by the four Autistic research assistants (Authors 1–4) via email and in an online meeting, until a consensus was reached on the prompts to use. The questions were designed to aid our reflection on being Autistic researchers, including working with Autistic participants as part of the AM2M study. The four researchers responded to the questions (available as supplementary material) in writing and in 1–1 recorded conversations with (Author 1). The reflective pieces were then analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2021) by (Author 1). A draft of the themes was presented to the team for discussion and refinements were made until all authors agreed.

Results

Two themes were developed from the thematic analysis: *Autistic culture*, divided into “within the research team” and “when working 1–1 with participants” and *Safety and comfort*, divided into considerations “for the researchers” and “for the participants”. We use illustrative quotes from discussions and reflexive writing, but do not attribute individual quotes to specific researchers to protect researchers and their participants.

Autistic Culture

This theme encompassed how researchers’ working practices were influenced by their Autistic identity, if they were. This covered how they felt about the AM2M study itself as well as how they developed rapport with their participants.

Within the Research Team

When applying to work as a researcher on the AM2M study, knowing that the research team would also be Autistic was of mixed importance for team members. There were hopes a fully Autistic team would benefit from a shared knowledge and understanding. There were also concerns around the potential for an expected homogeneous type of Autistic person, and how we would fit in.

I was slightly concerned that there may be an expected “autistic norm” I was supposed to understand – there have been times where I have felt excluded in autistic spaces because I didn’t have a shared lived experience with others, so I was tentative about how this would play out...

For two researchers, the most important aspect was role competence, knowing they would fit the role’s parameters due to their lived and prior research experience. There was also an importance placed beyond having a shared neurotype, instead focusing on the shared values of the research team. These included being neurodiversity-affirming and trans inclusive in the project, using respectful communication and providing appropriate disability accommodations. There was also a focus on the shared motivations of this team itself, such as improving the lives of Autistic people and their reproductive healthcare as demonstrated here.

It was more about the values of the study and the research team, rather than us being alike... There’s a shared neurotype but there has to be something else. We’re committed to the same values... to changing things for autistic people.

When working 1–1 with participants

Similarly, researchers avoided presumptions about their participants. Researchers emphasised meeting each participant on an individual level, tailoring the interview to their communication and scheduling preferences. Although it was acknowledged that each relationship was different, building rapport with each participant was important for every member of the research team.

There are participants I have more in common with than others – for the ones I don’t have much in common with, I am open and curious about them even if I can’t relate to their interests/ experiences.

There’s a point to be made about like-mindedness – there’s still rapport, but there’s a different quality to the rapport between the participants who want to chat and those who are focused on the topic itself or have differing opinions.

Some of the interview methods were viewed as better suited for rapport building, such as synchronous interviews, as opposed to asynchronous interviews over email or social media messages, which typically resulted in less data production, and “*less of a sense of the participant*”. Data production was emphasised as secondary to the participant’s comfort. In terms of content, the interviews featured a balance of on-topic and off-topic conversations. Researchers made efforts to ensure their participants felt heard and remembered as people, by not only attending to their individual needs and preferences but also remembering details about their personal lives, to encourage conversation about topics beyond the project’s remit. Researchers would allow additional time for off-topic discussions, as we felt this fit the study’s person-centred and power-sharing ethos, built rapport and may have led to relevant comments and reflections that might not have surfaced had the researcher restricted the natural flow of conversation. Researchers reported that these off-topic discussions were also enjoyable. There were also instances where the researchers felt it was appropriate to share their own relevant experiences with

participants, again to build rapport, address the power dynamic, and elicit further conversation from their participants.

If there's an opportunity for shared experiences to be celebrated/shared I will usually do it, unless that interrupts their narrative, in which case I try to remember to tell them at the end.

When working with Autistic participants, concerns about being perceived as judgemental by participants were reduced, based on having a shared Autistic experience. The research team felt more relaxed in their interviews compared to previous experiences of qualitative data collection, believing it was less likely they would be judged against neuronormative standards for how a researcher "should" act. For example, researchers felt OK to stim if they needed to, unless this would impact on the participant negatively, such as by distracting them from their narrative.

In some ways I have been more accepting... In another role I wouldn't dream of being on a video call without makeup for fear of being seen as unprofessional. In this study I feel far more relaxed and less worried about how I'm being perceived.

Some participant contributions were removed from transcripts at the participant's request, as they wished to share certain information solely with their researcher specifically. A similar consideration was allocated to the researcher's personal data, which was removed from transcripts prior to the analysis stage.

I have professional boundaries for what I want to share depending on the context. Sharing as a researcher online (on social media) versus sharing with my participants or contributing to something that's shared even wider. I've shared things with participants that I've then removed so we don't out ourselves.

In terms of data sharing, there were elements of the interview that participants wanted to share just with the project, rather than sharing with future research teams and projects. Some of our research team also had reservations about sharing parts of the interview, as although identifying information was removed to ensure the participants' anonymity and that of the researcher, there were community-specific in-jokes, which without context may be misunderstood or re-interpreted in a negative light by future researchers.

I know we anonymise comments but some of the in-jokes we share in our community are only FOR our community. I wouldn't like them to be misconstrued or used against us by people who aren't as neurodiversity-affirming.

Sharing during interviews differed across researchers. When considering whether to share personal information, researchers took into account the topic being discussed, the participant's individual needs at the time, and the researcher's own comfort. Researchers sometimes wondered whether they had overshared or been too informal in their approach. At times, sharing had "felt right" as part of the natural back and forth between researcher and interviewee. Researchers felt this benefited the participant by showing reciprocity and encouraged them to share more.

I sometimes wondered whether I'd shared too much at points but seeing as we're hoping our participants will give us this very personal information, it only seems fair/fitting to show an openness yourself, when appropriate.

Safety and Comfort

Autistic researchers reflected on the safety and comfort they encouraged both for themselves by adapting their working practices, and for their participants by tailoring communication and interviews themselves.

For the Researcher

There is a level of safety and comfort for the research team due to the longitudinal nature of the study, and each research team member is on a minimum of five years' employment contract. With this opportunity, the team's knowledge of the subject matter can be greater, they can build relationships both within the team and with participants and can relax into the role rather than also having to seek other funding and working opportunities. They can also witness the life changes and updates of their participants, which the team appreciate.

"For me there's some security, it gives me time to get into the project. If everyone stays on board, you can build good working relationships with the team."

Having more time with participants, including a meeting for the onboarding process, and getting to know participants and their needs prior to data collection, allows for a more caring process. This may lead to richer, more in-depth data as participants become comfortable with their interviewer.

It's good for participants because they get to know us, there's real care (for example when they introduced a new researcher) in doing a swap-over. They can get to know us.

As part of an Autistic research team, the researchers experience both an insider and outsider status on this project. The research team are all AFAB and Autistic themselves and had experienced some of the topics covered within this project. The team discussed managing the interplay between being themselves whilst presenting the professional side of themselves in the interviews, sometimes linking this into sociological theory.

Arguably, being professional is not inauthentic, just prioritising facets of your personality to meet the person where they're at.

I put up a more front-stage view for some and a more backstage view for others (Goffman, 1959).

All researchers had disclosed their Autistic identity as part of recruitment for the project. There was a discussion surrounding the balance between being openly Autistic as a researcher and being the '*Autistic professional*'.

Although this project is autistic-led, I still feel a responsibility to professionally mask. Ensuring I am making the “correct” facial expressions when someone is, for example, sharing a story of something horrible happening to them, or even if they are making a joke.

However, we felt that it wasn’t necessarily inauthentic or a negative thing.

I do feel pressure to mask, but more in a typical “professional” way to appear welcoming – I think this would be the case whether I was autistic or not.

This was discussed under the term “masking”, a term we all understood, although some researchers were unsure if this term was appropriate to describe the adaptations made in interviews. This is because all professionals, regardless of neurotype, have a work persona, but masking is a term specifically used in the Autistic community to describe the adaptation of behaviours based on context and interpersonal relationships (Pearson and Rose., 2023), so may not fully encompass what the team was referring to.

The cognitive load of working as an Autistic researcher in Autism research is not often described. Researchers noted they were able to manage their personal needs whilst making the adaptations necessary to appropriately support their participants. There was an understanding that the role of researcher would require flexibility to better aid our participants’ diverse needs, which, at times, may have contradicted our own individual preferences.

If my needs are in opposition with a participant’s needs, however, I feel like I have to suppress these to ensure the participant’s comfort above my own (for example if a participant needs to communicate through voice notes and I find voice notes difficult).

Autistic researchers fulfil their work role, as well as potentially having a personal connection to their work and feeling a pressure to appropriately represent and support their community through their work. They may also face discrimination or stigma in the workforce, alongside reading about it in published academic work. Our Autistic researchers, who all align their personal philosophy within a neurodiversity-affirming paradigm, often engage with materials which are framed within a medical model, using pathologising, deficit-based language, and discussing Autism negatively. Not only this, but the current landscape in Autism research can be political and divisive. As they often handle difficult topics during the day, this has led to a conscientious decision to limit engagement in materials such as this outside of working hours for some of our team.

I struggle with the politics of autism research, and it has been harder to engage with autism literature outside of work as it is now my job.

Other members of the team were less influenced by work-related material, which opposed their personal views. There was, however, an agreed sentiment that we were “*getting used to*” seeing negative narratives. It was also expected by the research team that difficult topics would be covered in the interviews.

I don't think any of the research team went into this with the presumption they wouldn't hear anything upsetting. I'm not saying it's nice but it's expected to a degree.

For the Participants

Researchers discussed how they worked to create feelings of safety and comfort for their interviewees by staying present with them, offering reassurance and breaks if required. Researchers also noted allocating themselves time following an interview to process anything which had been emotionally difficult. Researchers followed the study's agreed self-care practices, including building downtime into their schedules, speaking with other team members as part of a post-interview routine, and reducing or adjusting their workload following an interview.

Knowing when to walk away from the computer is important. For anything that relates to me I take some time to process it afterwards and speak to one of the team about it.

Researchers noted that engaging in active listening, whilst performing the "professional researcher" role alongside working to create a connection over geographical distance, can be tiring.

This constant internal monitoring of my physical body is exhausting and takes a lot of energy.

This was especially when the preferences of participants differed from researchers' natural communication style or mode, with some interviews more "*draining (of) the social battery*" than others and required more rest afterwards. However, researchers emphasised that the communication method chosen by the participant was the most important to them. Researchers also reflected that remembering participants' individual needs and adaptations can be time-consuming and requires additional consideration, which differs from the requirements they had experienced when working on previous research projects. However, making these accommodations for participants was important to all researchers to ensure that their participants felt comfortable during the interviews. Researchers noted that their participants have shown comfort in advocating for their needs during interviews.

Discussion

The aim of this piece was to describe and reflect on a group of Autistic Autism researchers' experiences and to use these, plus other published literature, to determine recommendations for Autistic autism researchers, managers and funders. This structure of this study creates a unique opportunity to reflect on Autistic academics working with Autistic participants, something rarely explored in the literature. Themes identified within our data strongly related to culture, safety and comfort. These included the importance of shared values within the team, efforts made to tailor interviews for participants, masking as a researcher, and navigating our insider status. Finally, we present recommendations for Autistic researchers within the field of autism, managers and funders.

As part of navigating the insider-outsider dichotomy (Louis and Bartunek, 1992), our researchers considered how much of their authentic selves they should bring into the interview setting, versus using

a more neutral approach. Having an identity or social position in common, such as a neurotype, offers a potentially easier creation of a shared cognitive environment, a mutually manifested cognitive space, because of potential shared assumptions (Williams et al., 2021). This enables Autistic researchers to co-create a social reality, with each participant as an individual, which isn't grounded in neurotypical norms (Milton, 2025) as discussed in other research with similar researcher-participant dynamics (Hedlund et al., 2025). The shared environment developed through our insider status creates an opportunity to share some of what Goffman (1959) argues is our backstage, thereby reducing some of the front stage persona often enshrined in neurotypical standards. This includes considering how we as Autistic researchers mask, creating a new professional performance which may be more authentic to ourselves, a topic mentioned in our collective reflections. This is not to say we do not mask, as masking can be a trauma response (Pearson & Rose, 2021), rather, how we present ourselves to Autistic participants may be more in line with our own identity standards, which we define as a set of meanings that set out who one is (see Stets & Burke, 2000; Waldock, 2024) as an Autistic researcher. This gives the researcher the autonomy to adapt themselves however they'd like, based on context, rather than assuming the neutral, professional, face as default (Pinnegar & Quiles-Fernandez, 2018). This further supports rapport building (Bukamal, 2022) through perceived similarities with our participants (Merriam et al., 2001).

Considering neurotype when defining one's positionality is not something all researchers typically do, due to neuronormative assumptions in research. This parallels other marginalised groups or social positions in research, where there is an incorrectly assumed "norm" surrounding areas such as, gender (Connell & Pearse, 2014), race (Roberts & Mortenson, 2022), and queer identities (Robertson & Orthia, 2021). One's neurotype is an additional consideration for an Autistic researcher engaging in reflexive practices, questioning how their way of communicating and working influences their data collection, analysis, and dissemination, whilst potentially challenging the "norms" of research culture (Bertilsson Rosqvist et al., 2019b). Often, Autistic people must adapt themselves to working practices which suit a neuronormative academic system, which may impact the quality of the work produced (Bertilsson Rosqvist et al., 2019b). The team experienced being openly Autistic from the outset of the project, which is a privilege not all researchers have (Phillips, 2024). This may have allowed researchers to feel more agency to choose how to communicate or behave with their participants. Autistic researchers may feel pressure to disclose their neurotype as part of their reflexive practice, echoing both the pressure disabled researchers may face (Campbell, 2009; Kwon, 2024), and experiences of other researchers with marginalised identities or social positions (e.g., Kim, 2024). However, we strongly believe that researchers should be allowed to define their positionality in a way which is beneficial and safe for them. Such agency is especially important in the current global, political, climate, particularly for researchers whose experiences are shaped by processes of othering (as echoed by Said, 1978, p.43 regarding power and dominance) or that of a "spoilt identity" (Goffman, 1963, p. 19).

Structures and values of academic institutions are shaped by neuronormativity, and reinforce ableist norms (Dirzis, 2025). Autistic researchers often have additional work stressors surrounding disclosure and impression management, the hidden curriculum of academic structures (Phan et al., 2025), and are often exposed to stigma in the workplace (Milton, 2025; Roberts, 2026). Our project incorporates

working practices which go against neuronormative principles that currently shape higher education working environments, particularly in the UK, echoing calls from Waldock and Khan (2025) for academic spaces to embrace crip practice. Crip practice is what Parrey (2020, p.37) describes as ‘strategically reorient(ing) one's (emotional) associations with disability in the sense of “ways of knowing and feeling disability”’. There are also calls to neuroqueer, assess and reject heteronormative and neuronormative practices within academia (Walker, 2021). Both of these practices create possibilities for inclusion and epistemic justice, a condition of non-domination and ideal of freedom (Fricker, 2013, p. 1324), sitting in inverse to epistemic *injustice*, when someone is not perceived as a credible bearer of knowledge (Fricker, 2007). Accommodations made for participants will be something we discuss with participants in a later wave of data collection. As more Autistic academics disclose their diagnoses, there is a hope that future, neurodiversity-affirming research can be conducted on the Autistic experience of research which centres on the Autistic community. Based on our own findings, and the existing literature, we have drawn together the following recommendations for Autistic researchers in the field, alongside their managers.

Recommendations:

The following are recommendations for Autistic researchers and those supporting Autistic researchers. These recommendations are drawn from our own reflections in conjunction with existing literature, encompassing recommendations for Autistic and neurodivergent researchers, as well as those of undetermined neurotype. Not all recommendations will be applicable for all Autistic researchers, nor will they be possible for some working environments or social, political, and cultural contexts.

Key: The cited literature provides recommendations for (assumed) non-Autistic¹, Autistic², or neurodivergent researchers³.

Strengths and Limitations:

The AM2M project provided the rare opportunity to explore the views and experiences of Autistic AFAB researchers undertaking a longitudinal interview study with Autistic participants and overseen by an Autistic lead researcher in a UK university. Data is created over multiple waves of interviews, spanning several months, allowing the team's four researchers to reflect on their processes, and to engage in theoretical consideration of any of their insights. We realise our team has a unique set of circumstances, meaning that these reflections may not be transferable to other Autistic researchers working within higher education. Phenomena such as masking in Autistic researchers are rarely discussed in the existing research literature. There is also a substantial gap in institutional knowledge for how to support Autistic researchers. Future research could focus on the unique experiences of Autistic researchers, including any barriers and strengths. It should also investigate and appropriately encourage and support Autistic people in their postgraduate studies and early research careers (Pukki et al., 2022).

Conclusion

The experiences of Autistic researchers conducting Autism research has been under-researched, limiting the potential to remove workplace barriers. Our reflexive analysis identified unique considerations Autistic researchers make in the workplace for themselves, and accommodations made for their participants to ensure their safety and comfort. We also provided recommendations for the accessible inclusion of Autistic researchers within Autism research teams, including suggestions for managers and funders, which may have relevance beyond Autism research. To create a more equal society, it is imperative to support Autistic Autism researchers to aid in their career development, benefit from the insider perspective, and care for Autistic participants.

Declarations

Author Contributions:

Dr Rebecca Ellis – Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Writing – Original Draft Preparation, Writing – Review & Editing.

Dr Krysia Waldock – Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – Review & Editing

Dr Harriet Axbey – Data curation, Writing – Review & Editing

Dr Ami Nisa – Data curation, Writing – Review & Editing

Dr Aimee Grant - Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – Review & Editing. Supervision, Funding acquisition

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Table 1

Table 1
Recommendations

<i>For Researchers</i>	<i>Personal wellbeing</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage in less demanding tasks if there has already been a difficult or emotionally charged day. • Ensure you attend to your personal needs (keeping hydrated, dressing comfortably, having stim tools available, taking breaks). • Block out time pre- and post-interviews to allow for preparation and decompression (Silverio et al., 2022)¹. • Access peer support following interviews to debrief. • Discuss any difficulties with members of the wider research team, including peers and supervisors, whether these are emotional or practical in nature (Silverio et al., 2022)¹.
	<i>Being a self-informed researcher</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand your positionality and values. When considering future career choices, prioritise what is important to you in terms of epistemology. For example, does the institution, organisation, or project align with your research-based values and philosophical standing? Also, be aware that these may change over time. • Make changes to accommodate the needs of participants whilst also making adaptations for yourself. For example, consider not only working times that fit the participant's routine but also allowing flexibility in your own working hours. Acknowledge the pressure we often feel to conform to academic and research practice "norms", whilst adapting our own working practices to suit our needs (Phillips, 2024)². • Consider working towards dismantling work habits derived from neuronormative expectations by understanding your working practices, such as how many hours one can work before resting (Laude, 2024)³. • Reflect on helpful practices in your field notes and be reflexive in your practice (Morse et al., 2008)¹. Recognise that you may have an emotional investment in and connection to their work, especially when working with challenging topics (Dickson-Smith et al., 2007). Understand that your triggers can be fluid. • Consider what you are willing to share about yourself with participants.
	<i>Curating beneficial academic experiences</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop an understanding of the current political context in which we work, such as acknowledging the tensions and divisions within academia and the Autistic community, the core differences in narratives we as researchers are likely to face (Botha & Cage, 2022)². Consider how this may impact your work.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider whether public disclosure is “safe” and/or the right choice for you in your career or institution. • Consider your needs for conferences, e.g., whether they use neurodiversity-affirming language, whether they offer disability accommodations and other social engagements.
<i>For Management</i>	<i>For managers</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen and believe reports of challenges from Autistic staff. Create an environment in which team members can rely on the supervision of their team leader (Morse et al., 2008)¹. • Ensure disability accommodations are implemented. • Go beyond legal and institutional minimums. Support staff to identify accommodations, whether these are environmental or interpersonal (Twumasi & Burton, 2024)³. • Be aware that not all Autistic people will feel safe to share their neurotype in the workplace, but in many countries, they are still legally entitled to disability accommodations. • Never ‘out’ a disabled member of staff without their express agreement.
	<i>Recommendations for funders</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where government-provided support is inadequate, provide additional funding for disability-related costs. • Consider providing additional funded time for disability-related absence.

Supplementary Files

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