Identifying Effects of COVID-19 Pandemic-related Changes on Academic and Social Experiences of Autistic University Students

"Impacto de la COVID-19 en las experiencias académicas y sociales del alumnado universitario con autismo"

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III CONFERENCIA ESTATAL
sobre **educación, formación**
y trastorno del espectro del autismo (TEA)

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LA EDUCACIÓN DEL ALUMNADO CON TRASTORNO DEL ESPECTRO DEL AUTISMO DURANTE LA PANDEMIA DE LA COVID-19.
Análisis, retos y propuestas de futuro.

Effects of pandemic-related changes on general population

- Similar changes and measures during previous pandemics (e.g., SARS, Ebola) (Brooks et al., 2020; Jalloh et al., 2018) significantly affected general population (e.g., stress, depression, anxiety, PTSD)

- Unprecedented changes in daily routines

- Rapid changes in academic instructional delivery and social interactions

Effects of pandemic-related changes on autistic population

- "Some of these issues may apply to everybody during this pandemic, but they are especially heightened for autistic adults" (Cassidy, et al., 2020, p.116)

- "Outcomes related to socialization, have been particularly impacted" by COVID-19 emergency measures (Amaral & de Vries, 2020)

Possible positive effects of the pandemic on autistic students

- School closures and isolation *may* have positive consequences for autistic individuals (den Houting, 2020)

- Online learning and social interactions *may* be preferred by autistic students (Sinclair, 2010).

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COVID-19 Research challenge

Within a limited timeframe

- Identify and investigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic-related changes in academic instructional delivery formats and social interaction on the autistic university students in Canada and internationally

- Develop academic supports for autistic university students to increase autistic student success and retention

Research methodology

Emergent mixed methods study with a two-phase exploratory sequential design (Creswell, 2015)

- Ideal for understudied or not well understood research topics

- Phase One (qualitative)—current:
  - Semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of 6-8 autistic university students

- Phase Two (quantitative):
  - Development and administration of a large-scale survey informed by Phase One findings

RESULTS
Anxiety and sensory overload: Prior to COVID-19

- Previous research suggests that
  - "Anxiety is a pertinent issue for adults with autism" (e.g., Gillott & Standen, 2007), often associated with sensory overload (e.g., Prizant, 2015)

- Autistic university students in our study report similar experiences

Autistic students' voices

- "From waking up to going to sleep, no matter how positive a day you have, you are still going to be contending with the fact that these everyday stimuli that other people don't even notice are affecting you deeply. And like I said, it's the constant nature of that. It's the every-moment-of-every-day, for your entire life. And that's emotionally and mentally draining."

- "You're experiencing every emotion you could possibly have at a *magnified* level."

Experiences reported by students

Social

- Prior to COVID-19
  - Positive
  - Negative

- During COVID-19
  - Positive
  - Negative

Academic

- Prior to COVID-19
  - Positive
  - Negative

- During COVID -19
  - Positive
  - Negative

Reported social experiences: Prior to COVID-19 (1)

- Avoiding crowds; preferring small group or one-to-one interactions
  - "I'm very sensitive to loud noises and people."

- Monitoring own behaviour to "camouflage"
  - "I can't be myself because that would be too weird. So, there's expectations of how you have to act and say and look as well."

- Avoiding "small talk"
  - "I'm not sure what the words are [in "small talk"]. If it's a genuine thing; genuine exchange, if I am humaning with someone, that's fine, it's invigorating…"

Reported social experiences: Prior to COVID-19 (2)

- Preferring to interact with autistic people or empathic nonautistic people
  - [When asked about whether many friends were autistic] "I guess so [surprised voice]. I was going to say, no, no, I just do my thing and people accept it or they don't, except I surround myself with people who understand me, so I suppose yes, I don't moderate myself when I'm with the people who are my friends, and if I go off on some weird tangent or if I get a joke wrong . . . [it's not a problem]."

- Preferring to socially interact online (written formats)
  - "I do have, you know, lots of friends that . . . I would keep up with them online."

Reported social experiences: During COVID-19

Positive

Experiencing reduced anxiety

- "It was the quiet. I mean again, this is something that a lot of autistic students would bring up, but just the lack of noise, the lack of people everywhere was really . . . great."

Negative

Experiencing loneliness

- "The worst thing about COVID as it dragged on, was that after a while, not being able to see many of my friends, I started to feel a lot lonely."
- "It's a one-on-one thing, I guess, like I love having one-on-one conversations."

Reported academic experiences: Prior to COVID-19 (1)

Positive

- Finding a hard copy of information VERY useful
  - "That's a thing, I find it much easier . . . where they had a transcript of every video."

- Valuing neurodivergent mentors
  - "One of the mentors, I'm not 100% sure, but I'm 99.8% sure, and I just found that to be incredibly helpful because, I mean, who's better to help you than people . . . who have more understanding of what you go through."

- Valuing one-to-one interactions with empathic professors/instructors
  - "Working with her personally was really positive, she was really understanding, she made huge efforts to accommodate and try and understand the experience and like she was excellent."

Reported academic experiences: Prior to COVID-19 (2)

Negative

- Having difficulties managing the workload
  - "I passed it and I'm proud of what I did for that class, but I just didn't hand in every assignment because I just didn't have time."

- Becoming distracted, struggling to get organized
  - "I'll start thinking about things like, you know, on a scale that are way too big for anything that I should be working on . . . you know, it would take a series of lectures to explain to someone."

- Struggling with being on campus
  - "It's sometimes not that easy to be on campus . . . Let's just say my first three weeks there, I had a meltdown three times."

Reported academic experiences: During COVID-19 (1)

Positive

- Undergraduate students' preferring online learning/not being on campus
  - "Oh! definitely online, this summer semester has been really easy. So, it's a lot of content that I've had to have covered, but it's, yeah, I think it's better."
  - "I'm pretty okay not going back to campus until graduation."

- Closed captioning/transcripts enhancing learning
  - "When they give the transcript, I'm drrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr, done! I retain it; I understand it."
  - "I love closed captions, I have them on my TV all the time, it gives me something, I can break it into streams of input."

Reported academic experiences: During COVID-19 (2)

Negative

- Experiencing difficulty managing online courses
  - "I ended up abandoning that course because I couldn't coordinate it."
  - "Managing time is always tricky for me."

- Experiencing email anxiety
  - "And it's hard to express the fact that, just how anxiety-inducing I find checking an email inbox. There's no . . . it's not rational."

Reported academic experiences: During COVID-19 (3)

Negative continued…

- Experiencing Zoom "invasion"
  - "[I] didn't like it when they had, let's say there's, you know, some kind of a Zoom meeting and there's uh . . . 20 or 40 faces on the screen. It can be overwhelming that is so much harder than . . . being . . . in a room"
  - "I've said 'invaded' and I think I've described it like my house isn't mine, it's like it's being held by an occupying force" [because of seeing so many faces on the screen]

Research gap

Several recent publications have addressed the effects of the rapid unexpected changes associated with COVID-19 pandemic on autistic individuals (e.g., Espinosa et al., 2020; den Houting, 2020).

However, research that focuses on *autistic university students* has been limited so far (e.g., Smile, 2020)

Difference between undergraduate and graduate students

- Graduate students preferring to be on campus
  - "Even if, you know, on campus I mostly work on my own, just knowing that . . . You know, I could go kind of to the department and find some people to talk to there for a little bit, it was kind of encouraging."
  - "Just being in a place which wasn't so freeform, an actual academic environment, I'm not sure why it helped solidify the knowledge more, but it did."
  - "As of recently, [I prefer] face-to-face [to online courses because of] too much input, too much technological input and because, again, I can't control with whom I'm communicating, it's a bunch of new people."

Phase One: Preliminary observations (1)

- Wide range of different autistic experiences

- *Magnified* experiences

- Both positive and negative experiences

- Important distinctions between experiences of undergraduate and graduate students

Phase One: Preliminary observations (2)

- Somewhat contrary to the predictions made in previous literature, not all autistic university students thrive in isolation and enjoy online learning:
  - Feeling lonely
  - Missing face-to-face interaction
  - Experiencing issues of time management
  - Feeling stressed and overwhelmed by online conferences with multiple faces on the screen

- Closed captions/transcripts appear essential to autistic university students

- Dramatic difference observed between undergraduate and graduate students' attitudes towards isolation and online learning (different cost-benefit bases)

Call for participants and co-researchers

- "Identifying effects of COVID-19 pandemic-related changes on academic and social experiences of autistic university students"
- Call for participants:
  - **Autistic students** interested in sharing their lived experiences at university
  - **Autistic or non-autistic instructors** who have taught autistic students
  - **Autistic and non-autistic researchers** interested in collaborating with us, **PLEASE contact us!**

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