Editorial Introduction

Since the mid-2000s, autism awareness campaigns have highlighted the socio-economic inequalities experienced by autistic people globally and increased community awareness. Each year, *World Autism Awareness Day* focuses on a specific theme, which in 2021 was inclusion in the workplace. Promoting an 'autism advantage' and 'autistic talent' has become a key social change technique to increasing employer interest in hiring and valuing autistic workers. This paper applies a critical lens to campaigns raising awareness about 'autism' (even seemingly positive ones) to draw attention to the pitfalls of the marketisation of autistic people and 'autistic traits', proposing Universal Design as an alternative approach. Scare quotes are used in the paper to highlight the contingent nature of particular concepts and categories.

Autism at work campaigns: Are they creating inclusion in the workforce?

Calista Castles and Deanna Grant-Smith

Introduction: Autism at work

Globally the high unemployment rates of autistic adults have been flagged as an area of policy and social concern for over a decade (Della Fina & Cera, 2015). Autistic people have consistently nominated socio-cultural barriers such as stigma and discrimination as hindrances to gaining and sustaining employment (Baldwin et al., 2013). Campaigns and programs to educate employers and the broader community about 'autism' and the benefits of employing 'autistic talent' are designed to change community attitudes and behaviours by framing 'autism' positively. Awareness campaigns are becoming a fundamental social change technique to increase employer interest in hiring and valuing autistic workers. This is due, in part, to World Autism Awareness Day and an international commitment to raise awareness.

The poster from the University of Leeds (Figure 1) is an exemplar of recent campaigns raising awareness of 'positive autism'. This particular poster and others like it have been widely (re)shared on social media and received thousands of views since 2019. Similar examples are disseminated and (re)produced in the media (e.g., Allen, 2020), academic and grey literature (e.g., Bury et al., 2020; Kopelson, 2015), and on the websites of specialist recruitment and employment organisations such as Xceptional, Specialisterne and Untapped.

Awareness campaigns are based on the desire to do the right thing and improve socio-political conditions and, more recently, employment opportunities for autistic people. Benevolent diversity measures premised on this desire to do the right thing can inadvertently impose a worldview of what is desirable on the recipient of this 'good will', perpetuating inequalities and discrimination within the workplace (Romani et al., 2019) and society more broadly.

We are not suggesting any intentional malice in such actions. Instead, we propose these kinds of awareness-raising initiatives tacitly rely on ableist assumptions, a taxonomy of categorisation and a hierarchy of difference (Campbell, 2019) made possible by socio-historical contexts of segregated disablement based on normative assumptions of desirable functioning. Thus,

Figure 1. Poster celebrating the positive features of autism, University of Leeds (Cannon, 2018).

while educating society and employers about the strengths of autistic people may go some way to combating some prejudices and harmful practices, the frames of reference relied upon and evoked to do so may simultaneously reinforce or (re)produce harmful practices and prejudice.

Why do we raise awareness?

The literature consistently nominates socio-cultural barriers such as negative employer perceptions of disability, stigma, lack of employment support, and discrimination as hindrances to autistic people gaining and sustaining employment (e.g., Burke et al., 2013). Because unfavourable attitudes towards marginalised 'outgroups' can be a source of discrimination, prejudice and conflict, posters and campaigns, such as the one featured here from the University of Leeds, seek to (re)frame or market 'autism' by flipping the script on 'autism' and breaking down barriers to inclusion. And perhaps they are.

A recent study measuring the effect of *World Autism Awareness Day* campaigns on Twitter (Ahmed et al., 2018) found positive sentiment towards 'autism' increased during the campaign. Moreover, a large-scale population study in Northern Ireland (Dillenburger et al., 2013) found awareness campaigns contribute to high levels of awareness in the community but also contribute to the perception of homogeneity of autistic people and their experiences.

Of course, employers, autistic people and society can benefit from information and education about the experiences of autistic people. And raising awareness in and of itself is not a 'good' or 'bad' thing. Highlighting the strengths and skills of autistic people to employers and society more broadly could, in theory, change negative perceptions and open up more employment opportunities.

Positive framing is essential for awareness campaigns because the intention of social change marketing is to sell a good idea to influence attitudes and behaviours positively (Sayers, 2006). However, marketing campaigns that focus solely on 'positive autism traits' run the risk of (re)enforcing and perpetuating narrow stereotypes, which could further limit understanding of 'autism', opportunities in the labour market and the possibilities for much needed systemic change.

The implications of raising awareness

The current campaigns focusing on limited 'positive traits' constitute 'autism' and the 'autistic worker' as particular kinds of objects for thought with both positive and negative implications. Within 'positive autism' campaigns, the autistic subject is celebrated for possessing ordinary skills such as 'deep focus', 'attention to detail' and 'integrity' (Cannon, 2018). Would these traits be celebrated or considered *exceptional* if 'autism' was taken out of the equation?

The late Stella Young (2014), comedian and activist, used the phrase 'inspiration porn' to describe how people with disabilities are objectified for being able to do ordinary everyday things. Disabled people become exceptional because society does not expect people designated as 'disabled' or 'impaired' to possess 'normal' skills and abilities. If, for example, similar campaigns highlighted the benefits of hiring women based on their physical and mental capabilities, we would be (rightly) outraged. For years women have discouraged promoting gendered stereotypes—women are more empathetic, nurturing and compassionate—that serve to constitute women as particular kinds of subjects, suitable for specific types of roles, in particular kinds of organisations and environments

(Bacchi & Eveline, 2010). However, when it comes to selling the capabilities of disabled people, this approach is rarely questioned.

Until recently, 'autism' and other 'disability' categories have been understood solely through a deficit framework and portrayed negatively in the media and film (e.g., Jones & Harwood, 2009; Moore, 2019). In this context, it makes sense to raise awareness of the skills and capabilities of autistic people to tackle negative perceptions. However, there is a tension between advocating for a cultural shift in attitudes and understanding and the marketisation of particular traits associated with a particular 'group' of people.

How an autistic person's body and/or mind is interpreted socially and assigned meaning constitutes that person as a particular kind of subject, with specific types of 'problems' or 'strengths', amenable to particular to kinds of 'solutions' (Sullivan, 2015). Despite the good intentions of awareness campaigns, ableism understood as practices of differentiation and ranking that tacitly marginalise embodied difference based on normative assumptions of human functioning (Campbell, 2019) are reified and perpetuated through these campaigns.

Promoting 'positive autism traits' that align with socially desirable normative worker traits or skills implies that other traits or attributes associated with 'autism' are negative and undesirable. The greater concern is that campaigns marketing the 'autistic worker' in relation to particular normative abilities and skills are attempts to reconcile the autistic subject, often understood as a 'disabled' or 'disordered' non-worker, with a specific understanding of the 'worker subject' to imbue

what is perceived to have no value (disability, disorder, difference), with value.

For example, the Specialisterne Australia website states, 'Autistic employees are 92% more productive and 48% faster than non-autistic employees' (Specialisterne Australia, 2022, para 1). However, a systematic review of the literature found no compelling evidence to support an 'autism advantage' (Bury et al., 2020). That is not to say autistic people do not bring valuable skills and perspectives to a workplace or society; rather, it is to urge caution. It is unrealistic to place such expectations on any 'group' in society to be so exceptional that they outperform all other 'groups' and be above reproach (accepting of difference, less judgemental). To do so would overlook the real challenges that exist in a world constructed for some and not others.

There is also emerging research that suggests stereotypes of 'autism'-positive or negative -that do not align with personal experiences of 'self' can have negative ramifications for mental health and positive identity construction (Botha et al., 2020; Lilley et al., 2021). In line with such concerns, scholars and autistic advocates warn of the potential pitfalls of the growing dichotomies between neurodivergent and neurotypical, 'high' and 'low' functioning, and the commodification of desirable autistic traits and subordination of undesirable traits (Kopelson, 2015).

By focusing on those who are 'excluded' and marginalised in order to 'include' them, making them appealing to draw them into the 'majority', our attention is diverted from the power and privilege afforded to the already included, making systemic change difficult, if not impossible. We have

had awareness campaigns for over a decade, and autistic people continue to be misunderstood and misrepresented and still experience inequalities, discrimination, stigma and prejudice.

Universal Design as an alternative to awareness campaigns

A confluence of factors contribute to the economic and labour market inequalities for many around the world, including gender biases, racism, discrimination, poor work/job design and social theories that seek to divide us along the lines of social identities and human differences. Rather than drawing on traditional theories that accentuate the differences, we invite readers to focus on (re)organising work so that the most significant number of people benefit without having to be excluded before they are included.

To this end, we propose Universal Design as a paradigm for inclusivity. Contrary to traditional diversity and inclusion approaches that define or limit what diversity and inclusion mean, who is diverse and how they might be identified, Universal Design creates the conditions for diversity and inclusion to occur naturally. As shown in Figure 2, Universal Design is based on seven principles that guide design by facilitating broader consideration and discussion about how a place, space, activity or product could be used by a multiplicity of human differences without the need for stigmatising disclosure, modification or adaptation (Story, 2011).

Many of the diversity and inclusion measures that segregate socio-political groups, such as autistic people, women, people from
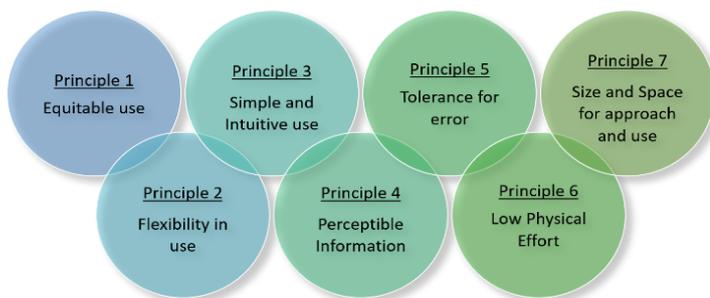
Figure 2. Seven Principles of Universal Design adapted from Story (2011).

culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and people variously classified as disabled, could benefit us all and negate the need for raising awareness of differences and transition society towards greater acceptance of the multiplicity of human difference. For example, designing low stimulus work environments benefit autistic people and people with hearing aids, chronic health conditions (e.g., migraines), or eye sensitivities. Flexible work arrangements benefit autistic people, people with caring responsibilities and people with cultural or religious commitments.

Moreover, if social, work and learning environments were universally designed from the outset, it could negate the need for individualistic, reactive, restorative justice practices, which tend to reinforce the marginalisation of embodied differences, and may be perceived negatively by the 'majority' 'ingroup' members, and contribute to increased prejudice and social tensions (Gotsis & Kortezi, 2015). Another advantage of Universal Design is that it creates workplace environments where all people feel safe to ask for adjustments, disclose social identities, a disability

or condition, and request flexible work arrangements if such arrangements enable the employee to work to their full potential. The co-produced Guidelines for Creating Autistic Inclusive Environments (Gatfield et al., 2018) is a useful resource to start thinking about incorporating elements of Universal Design in workplaces. Similarly, the National Lived Experience Workforce Development Guidelines (Byrne et al., 2021) could be adapted to assist organisations to prepare, implement and transform their workforce to be more diverse and inclusive.

Conclusion: Moving towards *acceptance*

The Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN) advocates for autism acceptance as an alternative to autism awareness to address anti-autism prejudices. There is a pressing need to shift from the awareness mindset that makes autistic people visible to a more nuanced and accepting mindset that creates safe work environments where disclosure is voluntary, alternate recruitment pathways and flexible arrangements are available to all, and recognition that society is enhanced when all people feel accepted, included, and valued. While there is still much work to be done to create just and fairer workplaces, embedding Universal Design philosophy into work design and, more broadly, in a diverse range of policy areas, work, employment and labour planning and the implementation of services and goods could move society closer to acceptance.

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