**Title**: Predictors of Paid Employment for Autistic Young Adults

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**Introduction**: Prior research has identified the challenges in obtaining paid employment for autistic young adults. Paid employment, regardless of wage level, often serves as a source of identity and inclusion for autistic adults. However, many autistic individuals have historically earned significantly lower wages compared to non-autistic adults, impacting their financial independence (Gerhardt et al., 2014). Research has primarily focused on stable individual factors such as age (being older), gender (being male), race/ethnicity (being White), and higher cognitive ability as predictors of employment (e.g., Eilenberg et al., 2019; Schall et al., 2014). While these factors offer important insights, they are largely inherent characteristics that cannot be changed. This highlights the need to explore skills-based factors, such as executive functioning and employment-related social skills, which can be improved through interventions and may directly affect workplace success for autistic individuals. Given these considerations, this study aims to examine both demographic factors and skills-based predictors of paid employment experiences in autistic young adults.

**Method**: Data was collected at baseline to determine eligibility for a randomized controlled trial examining the efficacy of a 20-week employment social skills program, PEERS® for Careers, which focuses on teaching employment-related soft skills (e.g., resume writing, interviewing skills, requesting accommodations). Demographic data such as gender and race/ethnicity were gathered. The Wechsler Abbreviated Scales of Intelligence, 2nd edition (Wechsler, 2011) was used to estimate full-scale IQ (FSIQ). Employment-related social skills were assessed using the Test of Employment Social Skills (Moody et al., 2022), while executive functioning and abstraction were measured with the Delis–Kaplan Executive Function System (Delis, 2001) 20-questions subtest. The sample consisted of 102 autistic adults (81% male, 48% White; *M*age = 23.5 years, *SD* = 3.6; *M*FSIQ-2 = 109, *SD* = 13). Of these, 52.9% reported previous paid employment experience, including paid internships, while 47.1% had no experience.

**Results**: A binomial logistic regression was conducted to examine the influence of age, gender, race/ethnicity, employment-related social skills knowledge, IQ, and executive functioning on prior paid employment experiences. The regression model was statistically significant, *χ*2(6) = 14.71, *p* < .023, explaining 20.5% of the variance (Nagelkerke *R2*) and correctly classifying 70.5% of cases. Three predictor variables were statistically significant over and above all other predictors: age, gender, and race/ethnicity. Increasing age was associated with a higher likelihood of having paid employment experience (*p* < .029). Females were less likely to have had employment experiences than males (*p* < .028). Additionally, being a person of color was associated with a lower likelihood of paid employment experience compared to White participants (*p* < .045).

**Discussion**: The findings of this study largely replicate previous research, emphasizing demographic disparities in employment outcomes for autistic young adults. Notably, executive functioning and employment-related social skills were not significantly associated with paid employment outcomes. One hypothesis is that while these skills are essential, they may not be enough to overcome external barriers like stigma and limited opportunities. Therefore, addressing employer bias and promoting equitable access are key to ensuring that all individuals can benefit from these opportunities. Earlier exposure to job-related activities remains crucial for positive employment trajectories (Wehman et al., 2020), particularly considering the well-documented service cliff many autistic individuals face after age 18. Gender and race/ethnicity disparities also emerged, indicating that these groups may encounter additional barriers beyond skill deficits. Targeted efforts, such as reducing employer stigma and improving access for autistic women and individuals of color, will be vital. While skills-based programs are essential, addressing implicit bias and employer perception disparities will ensure that all individuals, regardless of gender or race/ethnicity, can fully benefit from these opportunities. Additionally, the intersectionality of autism, gender, and race/ethnicity should be further examined in future studies. Although executive functioning and knowledge of employment-related social skills were not significant in this study, these remain essential workforce skills and should continue to be explored.

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