

# Supports and Barriers to Inclusive Workplaces for LGBTQIA+ Autistic Adults in the United States

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## Abstract

**Background:** Autistic people and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and people of other sexuality or gender minorities (LGBTQIA+) experience worse unemployment rates than allistic or cis-gender, straight people. Yet, there is limited research to understand the employment experiences of people with both autistic and LGBTQIA+ identities. Therefore, in this study, we aim to describe the barriers and supports for inclusion in the workplace for autistic LGBTQIA+ adults.

**Methods:** This analysis utilized data from a larger mixed method, participatory research study, including qualitative data from 35 LGBTQIA+ autistic adults who were working part- or full-time. Participants were engaged in a semi-structured interview or a focus group. Data were analyzed using an interpretative phenomenological analysis. An audit trail, checks for representativeness, and negative case analysis were utilized to promote trustworthiness of data analysis.

**Results:** Several factors contributed to participants' feelings of inclusion or exclusion within workplace settings. "Red flags" such as safety concerns, accessibility issues, stereotyping, and challenges with communication contributed to feelings of exclusion and the need for compartmentalization of identities. Contrarily, "green flags" such as workplace culture, representation, and accessibility contributed to increased feelings of inclusion and comfort disclosing identities.

**Conclusions:** Our findings suggest that many LGBTQIA+ autistic individuals compartmentalize certain identities to protect themselves due to oppressive workplace settings, but this can be detrimental to one's well-being and contribute to autistic burnout. These findings suggest multiple recommendations to improve inclusion in workplace settings, as well as various next steps for future research.

**Keywords:** employment, LGBTQIA+, intersectionality, qualitative research, participatory research

## Community Brief

*Why is this an important issue?*

LGBTQIA+ and autistic adults face increased risks of unemployment and underemployment as a result of discrimination. Although the workforce statistics of both of these groups is well understood, many autistic adults identify as LGBTQIA+, and there is very little research exploring this intersecting group's experience in the workforce.

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*What was the purpose of the study?*

We wanted to identify and describe barriers and supports for autistic LGBTQIA+ adults in the workforce regarding their employment status and overall well-being as a result of workplace influences.

*What did the researchers do?*

We interviewed 35 autistic and LGBTQIA+ adults who were currently employed. The interview guide was created by the research team who were led by autistic LGBTQIA+ researchers. The interviews not only included questions that allowed participants to speak on guided topics but also allowed them to speak on things that were not planned as a way to accurately represent their experiences. We then analyzed all the transcripts from the interviews and organized the data by topics that were agreed upon by the research team. These topics were then closely assessed to create themes that painted a picture of autistic LGBTQIA+ experiences in the workforce.

*What were the results of the study?*

We found that participants look for “red flags” (safety concerns, accessibility issues, stereotyping, and challenges with communication) in fear of experiencing discrimination at work that causes feelings of exclusion. This results in people deciding to hide part of their identity, which is known as compartmentalization, and is detrimental to their mental health and quality of life. On the contrary, “green flags” (positive workplace culture, representation of diversity, and accessibility) led to feelings of inclusion and helped people feel more comfortable being openly autistic and/or LGBTQIA+.

*What do these findings add to what was already known?*

It is generally understood that individuals with multiple minority identities experience unique discrimination that is specific to the layering and complexity of their overall identity. What these findings add are the intricacies of how this specific group, autistic LGBTQIA+ adults, experience that discrimination, and also what part of current workplace policies and culture is positively affecting them.

*What are potential weaknesses in the study?*

The participants recruited were mostly young adults with low support needs. All were also able to communicate verbally, all of which can contribute to not being 100% representative of the autistic LGBTQIA+ workforce.

*How will these findings help autistic adults now or in the future?*

These findings produced recommendations that were reported directly from the autistic LGBTQIA+ community. This should help to guide future researchers, employers, coworkers, and policymakers on how to improve their employment experiences.

## Introduction

ACCORDING TO THE BUREAU of Labor Statistics, the national unemployment rate is 3.6%, yet those with disabilities experience an unemployment rate of 10.1%.<sup>1</sup> Autistic adults, in particular, experience an unemployment rate over eight times higher than those with other disabilities.<sup>2</sup> Among autistic adults who are unemployed, 69% reported a desire to obtain meaningful employment and have the ability and skills to be successful in the competitive workforce.<sup>2,3</sup> The lack of successful employment may be correlated with an imbalance between job support resources and demands, which can be explained by the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model.<sup>4</sup>

According to the JD-R model, a resource is provided to an individual based on their unique support needs for their job, while the demands themselves are the components of their job that cause stress and may require a resource to successfully complete.<sup>5</sup> For example, a resource may be an

accommodation to work flexible hours to complete the job demands of a report in hours where an individual has the greatest focus. An imbalance is created when acquiring resources turns into a demand because “employees expend excess energy” trying to access these resources.<sup>5(p2)</sup> Therefore, when autistic employees must expend excess energy to acquire necessary accommodations, the resource has become a demand. Autistic employees often worry about the impact of the imbalance between resources and job demands, and the impact the imbalance has on their mental health.<sup>6</sup>

The most prominent resource deficit autistic adults report having relates to the social demands of jobs.<sup>5,7,8</sup> Social demands include face-to-face interviews, providing customer support, and/or working with coworkers and managerial staff. This stressor can inhibit some autistic adults from applying to competitive jobs and may keep them from asking for support from coworkers or managers, all of which likely contributes to the increased unemployment rate. Another common stressor for autistic adults in the workforce is the

way in which their diagnosis is perceived by others in their environment.<sup>3,6</sup> Although some autistic adults require support, it is often not their ability to complete job responsibilities that is compromised, rather it is “the construction of able-bodiedness.”<sup>9(p421)</sup>

This means that disabilities that persist in this oppressive system are due to the lack of acceptance for new norms and refusal to change by neurotypical employers, managers, and colleagues.<sup>9</sup> Forcing autistic adults into a workforce whose culture and job duties are based in a structure that works against them serves as an occupational stressor, likely contributing to the underemployment rate.<sup>5</sup> This may also contribute to the fact that many autistic adults who are employed are overqualified for their current positions.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, not only do autistic adults struggle to find employment, but studies suggest that those who do obtain jobs are often not able to find work in their skill set or in an area meaningful to them.<sup>10</sup>

Underemployment, overqualification, discrimination, and work-related stress are some negative things autistic adults experience that can be described by ableism. The Center for Disability Rights describes ableism as a systemic belief that having a mental, physical, or psychiatric disability is inherently negative and that these neurodivergences require a “fix” or a “cure.”<sup>11</sup> Those who are forced to work in an ableist system face barriers because of the perceived idea that they are incapable of meeting job demands. These barriers are emphasized when re-occurring and residual discrimination is internalized by those with a disability diagnosis.

Like autistic adults, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual people, or those with another minority sexual orientation or gender (LGBTQIA+) are also affected by discriminatory workforces, specifically heteronormative workforces.<sup>12</sup> LGBTQIA+ adults have more college experience (87%) and more college or graduate degrees (47%) than the straight cisgender population (55% and 27%), yet the unemployment rate for LGBTQIA+ adults persists at higher rates compared with their straight cisgender counterparts.<sup>13</sup> In addition, transgender people experience higher unemployment rates: three times that of the national average at 15%.<sup>14</sup> Of those who are employed, 2% are forced into criminalized job roles, such as sex work and drug trafficking, to survive and create revenue for themselves.<sup>14</sup> Despite success in secondary education, underemployment rates among LGBTQIA+ adults are still high, similar to the rates autistic adults face in the workforce.

The employment gap is well defined and problematic for both LGBTQIA+ and autistic people. One contributing factor to these poor outcomes may be the disclosure of one’s minority status, which is not always obvious for LGBTQIA+ and autistic people. Disclosing minority status is a job demand shared between the autistic and LGBTQIA+ communities that has been proven to contribute to negative mental health, unemployment rates, and precarity of jobs obtained.<sup>3,5–7,10,15</sup> People’s general attitudes, skewed knowledge, and malicious behaviors toward individuals who do not fit White, straight, cisgender, able-bodied “norms” cause increased stress and can negatively impact their job performance.<sup>6,7,16,17</sup>

Given the impact of people’s attitudes, skewed knowledge, and malicious behaviors, it is imperative to discuss the additional influence of intersectionality. People with multiple

marginalized identities may experience additive or multiplicative effects of stigma and discrimination across systems, including in employment settings.<sup>18,19</sup> This is supported in the limited evidence currently available analyzing employment outcomes for people with multiple marginalized identities. Autistic people who also hold a marginalized race, ethnicity, or gender were more likely to be unemployed than those who were White, non-Hispanic, and male.<sup>19</sup> Black and transgender autistic people also reported greater instances of experiencing discrimination, stigma, and exclusion in the workplace.<sup>6,19</sup>

To combat these barriers, Employment Non-Discrimination Acts (ENDAs) were implemented in the 1990s to ensure job and personal safety for minority groups in the workforce.<sup>20</sup> ENDAs had the assumed role of lessening the wage gap for LGBTQIA+ people, but subsequently made it mandatory for individuals to disclose their identities to receive protection. A small positive change was made for cohabitating gay men in the United States who worked more than 30 hours/week, but other LGBTQIA+ individuals have yet to see the benefits.<sup>20</sup> Similar to ENDAs, laws have been passed that attempt to protect disabled people by ensuring that they have equitable access to reasonable resources to complete their job demands. Specifically, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 intend to prevent discrimination in employment settings and protect the rights of the disabled person seeking employment or currently employed if reasonable accommodations are required.<sup>21,22</sup> Yet, these legal protections have not contributed to a reduction in the employment gap specifically for autistic people.<sup>15</sup>

It is clear that ableist, heteronormative, and cisnormative expectations run rampant in the competitive workforce, leading to a lower quality of life for LGBTQIA+ and autistic adults. While the two communities differ in the way they express and present their minority identities, “the system of compulsory able-bodiedness that produces disability is thoroughly interwoven with the system of compulsory heterosexuality that produces queerness.”<sup>23(p2)</sup> The normative culture that both queer and autistic communities are forced into creates an occupational stress more than the autistic or queer label itself and causes similarities among their employment statuses and stressors.<sup>5</sup> Increased unemployment rates and precarity of jobs creates a domino effect, causing these communities to experience “fewer job protections, less access to extended health benefits, and greater economic insecurities.”<sup>16(p4)</sup>

It is vital to create equitable opportunities in a systematically homogeneous workforce, while also confronting the stress autistic and LGBTQIA+ communities are facing to improve employment rates and opportunities, as well as quality of life. Although there are currently no population-level statistics available to determine the number of autistic people who are LGBTQIA+, studies have shown that autistic individuals are more likely to be gender nonconforming, gender fluid, and/or identify as a sexual minority.<sup>24–26</sup> Therefore, the two communities cannot define necessary resources for their job demands without first examining the effects this intersection has in the workforce. There is a paucity of research that has analyzed the specific barriers and supports to employment for individuals at the intersection of autistic and LGBTQIA+ identities. Therefore, in this study,

we aim to describe the barriers and supports for inclusion in the workplace for autistic LGBTQIA+ adults.

### Methods

We used a participatory research approach including a team of LGBTQIA+ autistic co-researchers who were involved in all aspects of the study. The study team collected data via a demographics questionnaire and semi-structured interviews or focus groups to address the following study aims from a larger mixed method, participatory research study: (1) describe how LGBTQIA+ autistic adults perceive their intersectional identities' influence the nature and extent of their participation in the workplace and (2) identify the perceived barriers and supports to inclusion for LGBTQIA+ autistic adults in the workplace. The larger study included 57 LGBTQIA+ autistic adults and was aimed to describe how LGBTQIA+ autistic adults perceived their intersectional identities influenced the nature and extent of community participation across many different settings.

### Participants

Participants included in this analysis were 35 LGBTQIA+ autistic adults working paid part- or full-time jobs. The majority of participants were between the ages of 20 and 29 years, were White, and had multiple disabilities (Table 1). It is important to note that many participants identified more than one gender; however, the majority were transgender or nonbinary. The most commonly selected sexual orientations among participants were gay/lesbian, bisexual, asexual and pansexual, with many individuals selecting multiple identities. Participants primarily worked in education settings, required "some or occasional support" to do their jobs, and were highly educated, but primarily reported low annual incomes (Table 1).

### Procedures

One straight, neurotypical occupational therapy researcher (principal investigator [PI]) and one LGBTQIA+ autistic co-researcher developed the research question and aims. Three LGBTQIA+ autistic co-researchers developed all study materials, with assistance, as needed, from the PI and two straight, neurotypical research assistants (RAs). One LGBTQIA+ autistic co-researcher led recruitment efforts, specifically recruiting LGBTQIA+ autistic adults through various social media platforms, emails, and online sources, including autistic and queer organizations. The PI screened all participants using a Qualtrics eligibility survey developed by one of the co-researchers and enrolled them when eligible. Participants were eligible if they self-identified as autistic, LGBTQIA+, and lived in the United States. Participants were invited to participate in a focus group, but to promote accessibility, participants were able to choose to participate in an individual interview if they preferred.

Twenty-three participants participated in an individual interview and 12 participated in focus groups ranging from 3 to 6 participants per group. All participants reviewed and provided informed consent in accordance with Boston University's Institutional Review Board. Participants who were not their own legal guardian reviewed and signed assent forms, while their legal authorized representative reviewed

TABLE 1. PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

<i>Demographic characteristic</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Age, years		
18–19	1	3
20–29	19	54
30–39	13	37
40–49	2	6
50–59	0	0
60 and older	0	0
Race		
White	25	71
Black	5	14
Asian/Pacific Islander	2	6
American Indian/Alaskan Native	1	3
Not reported	1	3
Other	1	3
Ethnicity		
Not Hispanic or Latino/a/x	31	88
Hispanic or Latino/a/x	2	6
Not reported	2	6
Multiple disabilities		
Yes	19	54
No	16	46
Employment settings		
Education	9	26
Customer service and retail	4	11
Technology	4	11
Arts	3	9
Activism	2	6
Food services	2	6
Government agencies	2	6
Other	8	22
No response	1	3
Education		
High school or GED	1	3
Associates	3	9
Some college	6	17
Bachelors	11	31
Graduate or professional degree	12	34
Doctorate	2	6
Annual income		
<\$25,000	9	26
\$25,000 to \$34,999	1	3
\$35,000 to \$49,999	6	17
\$50,000 to \$74,999	4	11
\$75,000 or greater	0	0
Not reported	15	43
Workplace support		
"Total support needed"	0	0
"A lot of support needed"	2	6
"Some or occasional support needed"	11	31
"No support"	9	26
No response	13	37

GED, general education development.

and signed consent forms. Participants then completed a demographics survey developed by one co-researcher with input from the team and were scheduled to participate in a focus group or interview dependent on the individual participants' preferences and availability. Interviews and focus groups ranged from 19 minutes to 2 hours and 51 minutes in

length and were all conducted via a Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act-compliant Zoom platform.

The semi-structured interview and focus group guide were developed based on a combination of theoretical frameworks, including queer, crip, and intersectionality theory<sup>27–29</sup> and co-researchers' personal input. Questions were open-ended and focused on participants disclosing their identities, the factors contributing to whether they disclosed and whether that process was perceived positively or not, as well as the perceived supports and barriers to inclusion. Follow-up and clarifying questions were utilized as needed. The eligibility screener, demographics questionnaire, and semi-structured interview and focus group guide are available to readers upon request. All focus groups and 15 of the 23 interviews were conducted by both the PI and an LGBTQIA+ autistic co-researcher, while the remaining were conducted by either the PI alone or the PI and a straight nondisabled RA with permission from the participant to proceed. All data were temporarily saved on a secure Boston University's drive, de-identified, transcribed, and checked for accuracy by the PI or an RA.

### Data analysis

As data were collected, the research team developed an initial coding structure based on our research questions. The coding structure was refined until all interviews were completed and a final coding structure was determined by the research team and reviewed with the mentorship team, which included two psychologists, one with extensive experience conducting qualitative studies and using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA),<sup>30</sup> and two occupational therapy practitioners, one with extensive experience conducting participatory action research, at completion of all interviews and focus groups. Although IPA is typically employed with smaller samples, IPA was deemed appropriate given the need to interpret and amplify the lived experiences of the research participants who all shared LGBTQIA+ and autistic identities.<sup>30,31</sup> Furthermore, the length of the interviews and focus groups allowed for researchers to get rich and thick descriptions of all participants' lived experiences despite the larger number, which is necessary for IPA.<sup>30,31</sup>

The final coding structure was then applied to all focus groups and interview data using NVivo 10.<sup>32</sup> Data were then queried by the code "employment" and analyzed by one LGBTQIA+ autistic co-researcher, an RA, and the PI using IPA.<sup>30</sup> Specifically, the analysts (1) read and reread the transcript to become familiar with the data, (2) engaged in free contextual analysis, (3) commented on the use of language by participants, (4) commented on similarities and differences within each transcript, (5) considered theoretical connections related to the data including but not limited to, queer, crip, and intersectionality theory,<sup>27,–29</sup> and (7) finalized the themes with detailed descriptions and representative quotes for each one.<sup>30</sup>

Multiple methods were utilized to establish trustworthiness of the qualitative data, including the use of an audit trail<sup>33</sup> documenting all decisions regarding sufficiency of data, the coding structure, and development of themes, checking for representativeness<sup>33</sup> of themes across all participants, and the use of negative case analysis<sup>33</sup> to rule out

any discrepancies within the data among participants. All quotes included in this article were edited for clarity.

### Results

Several factors contributed to participants' feeling included or excluded within workplace settings.\* "Red flags" such as safety concerns, accessibility issues, stereotyping, and challenges with communication contributed to feelings of exclusion and the need for compartmentalization of identities. Participants reported issues associated with class and region that appeared to be correlated with increased "red flags." Specifically, jobs that were seen as lower class positions, were in southern areas of the United States, or had many colleagues who expressed conservative political ideologies increased the likelihood that they experienced one of the identified "red flags" and contributed to increased feelings of exclusion. Contrarily, "green flags" such as workplace culture, representation, and accessibility contributed to increased feelings of inclusion and comfort disclosing identities (Fig. 1).

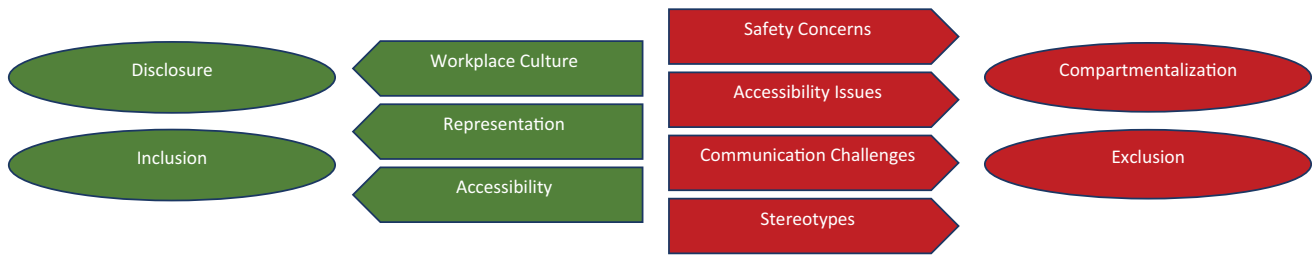
### Red flags

**Safety concerns.** Participants reported significant safety concerns. Safety concerns occurred when an individual feared disclosing their identity/ies due to the potential implications on their job and financial stability and/or physical safety. Safety concerns included direct discrimination and/or ableism as well. An autistic nonbinary or genderfluid, queer, 35-year-old explained, "if [someone in the workplace is] using language in a very obviously denigrating way. And by that, I mean like the F slur or something like that ... That's a safety issue." Another autistic nonbinary, queer, 33-year-old shared that their colleagues "say things that are very nasty about LGBTQ [people]," which contributed to feeling unsafe and unwelcome. Multiple participants also reported instances where they had been fired after disclosing their disability or because of ableism in the workplace.

These safety concerns were often related to power dynamics and/or policies. An autistic agender, pansexual 33-year-old explained, "when I'm not in a position of power or privilege I tend to be more quiet about [my identities]." Some people even described a sense of pressure to find jobs where they were in positions of power, so that they were protected and could be their true selves in the workplace. For example, an autistic nonbinary, queer, 36-year-old professor explained how they leveraged their power to be open about their identities. "Are you going to use the wrong pronoun or misgender the person who's grading all of your tests? No, that's what I thought ... I'm the one with the power in these scenarios. I just feel totally comfortable there." Some participants reported certain policies that contributed to their safety concerns, such as state at-will employment policies and workplace policies surrounding paid time off for bereavement.

"My workplace only recognizes biological family if they die as being deserving of getting funeral leave. It has to be your biological mother or father or siblings. And if someone in your

\*All participant identifiers/descriptors are using language identified by the participant themselves.



**FIG. 1.** Green flags that led to increased comfort disclosing identities and feelings of inclusion and red flags that led to increased compartmentalization and feelings of exclusion.

chosen family dies, they are legally, a friend, and you can only get one-day funeral leave to attend the funeral, but you can't get the four days for planning the funeral. And that's not explicitly homophobic, but it is homophobic, because our communities have chosen families, and often don't have biological families ..."—An autistic nonbinary, queer, 26-year-old.

**Accessibility issues.** Multiple participants reported accessibility issues and issues obtaining reasonable accommodations. These included concerns around disclosing their autistic identity to obtain necessary accommodations, feeling ignored or not believed after requesting accommodations, and being denied accommodations. For example, an autistic nonbinary, asexual, 26-year-old said, "in the world of professionalism and practice, thereby as an autistic individual, having to declare yourself to your employers that you are autistic has been some kind of [laughs] doom and gloom." These accessibility concerns often led to feelings of exclusion in the workplace. An autistic genderfluid, bisexual 26-year-old explained, "I don't really [feel] included, because workspaces are made for cisgender able-bodied people."

**Stereotypes.** Participants explained that when they did disclose their identities, their colleagues often treated them differently based on stereotypes. Specifically, some participants reported feeling infantilized and/or receiving "special treatment" that they did not need. Other participants explained that their colleagues sometimes did not believe that they were autistic because their behaviors did not fit the stereotypes or preconceived notions that their colleague held. Specifically, participants reported they often heard "Oh, you don't seem autistic."

"And it goes to show how much people don't think about autistic people as being part of their communities, or being in the room with them, or being part of their professional communities ... no matter how much I post first-person perspectives about being autistic, almost nobody's first thought is that I am talking about myself, rather than I'm talking about somebody else in my life."—An autistic bisexual, 38-year-old cis-woman.

**Communication challenges.** Many people also reported challenges communicating with neurotypical colleagues. One autistic bisexual, 38-year-old cis-woman shared, "the thing that's uncomfortable for me is more like if someone has a problem and politely doesn't say anything about it and it builds up and builds up and they tell me eight months later and I'm like, 'why didn't you tell me this before now'." This participant, along with many others, explained that often their

colleagues thought that "they knew," and many believed that these misunderstandings were related to different communication styles of autistic and neurotypical people. Participants shared that these miscommunications sometimes led to dismissal from the position or lack of opportunities to advance within the company.

**Compartmentalization.** Multiple "red flags" contributed to the overarching theme of compartmentalization. Compartmentalization is the process of selectively determining which identities to disclose and which to mask to protect yourself in some capacity. Initially, compartmentalization was identified in relation to safety concerns in the workplace.

"Basically, it comes down to money. I'm less likely to get fired because of bisexuality because sexuality is such a personal thing, like your bosses aren't going to like delve into that if they hear me mention it ... But with trans issues and autism ... I think I'm more likely to get fired for that because like you [are] requiring them to start using pronouns, then they have to start worrying about bathroom stuff, then they have to start worrying about disability stuff like the accommodations that I need. There [are] so many things that go into it, where they might see me more so as a liability, whereas sexuality is [more] private ... But it's a huge financial concern. I can't risk losing my job."—An autistic genderfluid, bisexual, 26-year-old

Many participants reported a hierarchical process of compartmentalizing. Specifically, they reported evaluating all their identities and assessing which they needed to hide in their specific workplace setting. Participants reported different hierarchies of identities they felt comfortable disclosing depending on their unique workplace situation and roles. While some participants may share their autistic identities on a "needs-basis," the majority of participants also reported not disclosing their LGBTQIA+ identities.

#### Green flags

**Workplace culture.** Although participants identified some instances in which regional or workplace policies were harmful, they also reported policies that were helpful. Many participants reported that anti-discriminatory policies were helpful, but also noted that it was important that those policies were followed strictly and that they felt comfortable with their superiors, so that they could safely report any concerns.

"I feel like I'm very lucky for the fact that the company I work for is overall pretty I guess liberal so to speak, they have the strict anti-discriminatory policy and the atmosphere is pretty

chill and I'm fairly close with my [general manager] and so it's a space where I can feel pretty comfortable talking about things where I guess where other people might not be able to."—An autistic lesbian, 22-year-old, cis-woman

Participants reported settings that had symbols that showed their support or allyship also contributed to their feelings of inclusion. Participants reported signs, stickers, and badges that indicated a safe zone, or rainbow flags or disability awareness signs made them feel safer and more comfortable. When organizations and institutions prioritized educating their employees and/or students about marginalized identities and implicit biases, participants felt more comfortable and included. Some participants reported that their organizations collected data that proved these diversity training programs had positive effects on their workplace culture. One graduate student who worked at their institution described the benefits of these trainings in more detail:

"One of my main markers of things that made me feel a bit safe on an institutional level was an awareness of identities and experiences, like the sexual harassment training and title IX stuff that they tend to do at the beginning of the semester for any new students, and just the demonstration that they're aware of non-straight relationships, and other such things ... That they were willing to acknowledge that queer people existed, and that there's titles to [their identities], and that [they could experience] harassment that falls under sexual harassment things and title IX stuff was definitely reassuring. And that they thought about it rather than just defaulting to a heterosexual norm and ignoring such identities ... that helped a bit when I came to graduate school in feeling comfortable at this school."—An autistic lesbian, 28-year-old, cis-woman

**Representation.** Participants reported that workplace settings were more inclusive to them if there were other people who shared their identities or held other marginalized identities. For example, if the setting had other openly queer and/or autistic people or people of color, they generally felt more comfortable. An autistic nonbinary, queer, 32-year-old shared, "the more diversity on every axis, the more diversity is respected." Participants also reported a hierarchical effect that this representation could have on them dependent on the identities their colleagues held. For example, if someone was queer, autistic, and a person of color and they saw representation of queer, autistic people, or autistic people of color those were seen as more helpful than those who were queer but non-autistic or White. An autistic nonbinary, queer, 32-year-old explained, "generally, if a space has only white queer people that's not a good sign for that space."

"Initially I wasn't going to come out as trans there. But even on my first day of being hired, I saw two other trans employees that were both open about who they were ... It was a very easy place to be open about that, so I kind of thought-okay maybe [I] can [be] open about this part of me too, because this is another thing that really affects my work and affects how I interact."—An autistic queer, 23-year-old, trans-man.

**Accessibility.** Although many people reported concerns surrounding accessibility, participants also reported instances where environments were accessible and accommodating without multiple challenging processes. Accessible environments contributed to feelings of inclusion. Participants

felt included in settings where people were open-minded and willing to accommodate various needs without formal processes in place. For example, adding captions on videos, allowing self-stimming behaviors, and including people with various disabilities when planning events to ensure accessibility.

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to identify supports and barriers to inclusion in workplace settings for the LGBTQIA+ autistic adults. The results of this study suggest that there are "red flags" (barriers) and "green flags" (supports) that impact LGBTQIA+ autistic adults' experiences at work.

"Red flags" included safety concerns, accessibility issues, stereotyping, and challenges with communication and often contributed to compartmentalization. These "red flags" were frequently reported in other studies that reported barriers to employment for autistic individuals.<sup>6,7,19,25</sup> However, as previously described based on intersectionality theory, the effects of these "red flags" may be amplified due to participants multiply marginalized identities.<sup>6,18,19</sup> Participants in this study reported compartmentalizing identities if their own evaluations of their workplace setting revealed more "red flags" than "green flags" or if the "red flags" held a greater perceived weight dependent on the unique individuals' situation. For example, participants working in oppressive systems who experience, or witness stigma, stereotyping, and communication challenges may feel forced to compartmentalize or hide aspects of their identities they feel they can successfully hide to maintain their job and financial security. These findings are corroborated in other recent work that has found people with multiple marginalized identities may need to mask aspects of their identities to maintain job stability.<sup>6,7</sup>

The process of compartmentalizing or masking certain identities at work is particularly important given compartmentalization or masking are correlated with negative mental health outcomes for autistic individuals.<sup>7,34</sup> Masking is also one of the leading contributors to autistic burnout.<sup>35</sup> The autistic community co-produced a definition of autistic burnout, explaining it as exhaustion or cynicism in response to masking their autistic traits to perform their job skills and describes it as "highly debilitating," causing problems with executive functioning and increasing the "manifestation of autistic traits."<sup>36(p2356)</sup> Recent research has found that working in these oppressive environments where autistic people compartmentalize or mask identities to maintain their job security can contribute to this autistic burnout and negative mental health outcomes, and these effects would likely be amplified for those with other marginalized identities such as LGBTQIA+ individuals or people of color.<sup>6</sup>

This discrimination is certainly exacerbated within the transgender community. Transgender people experience increased discrimination compared with people who are cisgender, resulting in higher unemployment rates, increased rates working in dangerous/explicit jobs, and decreased mental and physical health outcomes.<sup>14</sup> This is due to society placing varying negative values on different minority identifiers, which are dependent on how far one deviates from being neurotypical, cisgender, and/or heterosexual,<sup>17</sup> and is further described through intersectionality theory.<sup>27</sup> This is a significant contributor to compartmentalization and is the

reason discrimination against individuals varies, although they are within the same community. Transgender people who are also autistic have increased challenges fitting the “norm” and therefore mask, camouflage, and/or compartmentalize more, contributing to increased imbalances according to the JD-R model and increased rates of unemployment and mental illness.<sup>14,17,37</sup>

A central goal of queer theory and crip theory is to challenge societally prescribed negative notions of what it means to be “crippled” or “queer,” thus taking back words such as queer and cripple.<sup>28,29</sup> This is becoming increasingly difficult without more “green flags” in workplace settings. Thus, it is vital for workplace settings to improve their culture through protective policies that are upheld, more visibility surrounding safe and inclusive spaces (i.e., signs, stickers, badges, and flags), diversity and implicit-bias training. Furthermore, workplace settings must make greater efforts to enhance representation of people with multiply marginalized identities in their settings, and especially in positions of power. Participants described that when they held positions of power within their workplaces, they felt safer disclosing their identity. In turn, this allowed their subordinates or students to see an accurate representation of what it is to identify with these intersecting identities. And finally, workplace settings need to ensure that they are following ADA guidelines and have accessible environments and access to resources.<sup>21</sup>

#### *Implications and future research*

These findings support the need for greater inclusion in workplace settings. Importantly, administration in these settings needs to ensure that they are engaging in strategic planning and taking clear actionable steps toward inclusion to avoid performative inclusion. Performative inclusion occurs when a person advocates for inclusion, but clear actions are not taken to promote a more inclusive environment. Therefore, the following recommendations derived from the findings of this study should be implemented in workplace settings across the United States:

1. Allow flexible interview and hiring processes to meet individuals’ needs<sup>6,7</sup>;
2. Simplify and improve the clarity of the procedures to request accommodations<sup>6</sup>;
3. Improve access to natural supports and mentors, ideally individuals who hold similar multiply marginalized identities<sup>6,7,16,17</sup>;
4. Require diversity training that is inclusive of multiple marginalized identities<sup>7,16</sup>;
5. Include LGBTQIA+ autistic individuals in creating and adapting policies<sup>38</sup>;
6. Ensure clear policies and guidelines to prevent discrimination, to aide people in reporting potential discrimination or harassment, and to demonstrate your workplace as a safe space;
7. Shift power dynamics to include LGBTQIA+ autistic individuals and other multiply marginalized individuals in positions of power.

Additional research is needed to effectively support LGBTQIA+ autistic individuals throughout the hiring process and understand the supports and barriers to promotion.<sup>16</sup> Future research is also needed to better understand the impact

of disclosure of various marginalized identities in workplace settings on the individual, their employment success, and overall mental health outcomes so that guidance can be provided to LGBTQIA+ autistic individuals.<sup>6,7</sup> And finally, additional research is needed to examine employment outcomes, supports, and barriers for LGBTQIA+ autistic people of color since race often cannot be compartmentalized or masked, and these individuals may experience different supports and barriers than those reported in this study.

#### *Strengths and limitations*

This study has multiple strengths and limitations worth noting here. A strength of this study was giving the autistic LGBTQIA+ community a voice by using participatory research methods and IPA. Participatory research is a methodology that pushes advocacy by requiring that community members who also identify with the minority statuses of the research subjects are equal active members of the research project and align with best practice recommendations from the community.<sup>38–40</sup> IPA aims to avoid objectiveness of the personal accounts of research subject(s) by asking questions that lead to understanding their perceptions of their personal and social worlds.<sup>30</sup> This study also had a large sample size for qualitative research,<sup>41</sup> and the demographic characteristics of the participants were representative of race and ethnicity statistics in the United States.<sup>42</sup>

Some limitations included access to technology for participants, which may have limited the diversity of our participants. We also were unable to recruit participants from every state and were lacking older adults. Our sample had relatively low support needs, which could limit the generalizability of these findings to those with greater support needs.<sup>43</sup> Future research is needed to understand the specific employment barriers and supports for LGBTQIA+ autistic individuals with higher support needs. We also were unable to recruit any participants who utilized other forms of communication, such as augmented and alternative communication devices, again limiting our generalizability of these findings. In the future, we hope to expand our research team to include others with greater support needs and who use alternative forms of communication to observe if that supports participation from those with similar needs and forms of communication. Finally, further analyses to understand the supports and barriers specific to LGBTQIA+ autistic people of color are imperative.

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#### **Authors’ Contributions**

E.K.S. was the PI on the research study. She contributed to the development of the research protocol, semi-structured interview guide, all data collection, and oversaw data analysis. She wrote the Methods section, portions of the Results section, and edited all components of the article.

M.W. contributed to the development of the research protocol, semi-structured interview guide, some data



collection, and actively completed the data analysis for this article. He analyzed open-ended responses in the demographic survey to identify areas of work and wrote portions of the Results section and edited all components of the article.

L.G. contributed to the development of the semi-structured interview guide, some data collection, and actively completed the data analysis for this article. She wrote portions of the Results section and edited all components of the article.

S.M.E. contributed to the development of the research protocol, semi-structured interview guide, some data collection, and actively completed the data analysis for this article. They analyzed descriptive statistics from the demographic survey and edited all components of the article.

R.H. checked for representativeness of data and wrote the Introduction and Discussion sections of the article. She also reviewed the entire article and provided edits.

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