

Religious observance in Adults With High-Functioning Autism

An analysis of accommodation issues

By David N. Brown

Synopsis:

David N. Brown has carried out a survey about religion among adults with high-functioning autism. The survey was composed to solicit information on religious beliefs, past and present experiences within places of worship, sensory issues, and social functioning. 121 responses were received from late 2011 through early 2012. Based on these results, Mr. Brown has prepared a full report including recommendations for accommodating people with autism.

Project background

The survey has been carried out as a master's project for Denver Seminary. The project and survey were proposed by Mr. Brown and approved by the seminary. Approved goals and parameters included surveying only people with autism, from a potentially wide range of religious beliefs and backgrounds; full confidentiality for all respondents; and the overall objective of providing information and advice for Christian and potentially other organizations on how to accommodate members with autism. No funding or any other direct support was received from the seminary or any other source.

Survey findings

1. While more than a third of respondents self-identified as atheist or agnostic, the majority identified with a specific religious affiliation. Evangelical Christianity was the most common, and others appeared more commonly than in previously published data for the general population, particularly Judaism and “neo-pagan” groups. Despite the high proportion who self-reported as non-religious, respondents indicated more frequent and active participation in religious activities than might be expected for the general public. One-eighth of all respondents reported both regular attendance at a place of worship and involvement in additional religious activities (eg. Bible studies, charity, etc.)
2. Respondents were asked to report their age based on decade of birth, in part to establish the state of autism research and diagnostic criteria at the time. More than a third of all respondents indicated being at least 40 years old. A comparable number reported being born between 1980 and 1991. When surveyed on diagnosis and diagnostic history, more than 90% specifically selected Asperger's Syndrome, and more than 70% indicated a current professional diagnosis. Those who acknowledged being undiagnosed most commonly reported that the possibility of autism had either been raised in a professional evaluation or supported by family and friends. Lack of a diagnosis was most common in those over 40, but also relatively high in those born in the 1980s.
3. Respondents were specifically surveyed on their ability to drive. While almost half reported regular and unimpaired driving, a quarter reported being unable even to ride a bicycle. A significant but somewhat complex correlation was found between limited mobility and more limited participation at a place of worship: In particular, those who had no independent transportation still had a quite high rate of weekly attendance, but were underrepresented among those who participated in additional activities. Mobility also correlated significantly with age, with the greatest proportion of regular drivers being among those born before 1970.

4. When questioned about friendships, the majority selected the option of “many acquaintances” with “few close friends”. By comparison, a small number reported “many close friends”, while 1/6th of the group selected “little social interaction of any kind”.
5. Almost 3/4ths of all respondents indicated a social phobia. The most common selection was “fear or extreme discomfort” in crowds, which may in the strict sense be a symptom of sensory stress rather than a phobia. More than a third of respondents selected reported fears involving embarrassment, rejection and abuse.
6. When questioned on marital status and romantic history, exactly identical numbers (31 or one-quarter of the sample each) selected either “currently married” or having no history of “serious” dating. When responses were correlated to those regarding friendships and attendance at a place of worship, those who reported no romantic history were in many respects favorably comparable to those who were currently married.
7. Sensory stress was pervasively reported as an issue in places of worship and in other settings. When questioned on responses to sensory stress, 30% reported leaving a situation. Only somewhat smaller proportions reported either becoming “agitated” or avoiding certain settings and situations entirely. In addition, about 10% of respondents identified sensory issues as the main reason for leaving a place of worship.
8. Many respondents reported serious social difficulties in past or present places of worship. Interpersonal conflict was cited more frequently than sensory issues as a reason for leaving a church, and many respondents who filled out an essay component of the survey specified that both had been factors. Essay responses commonly reported some form of social problems, including negative reactions by others to typical autistic behaviors. Even those who reported being satisfied with a current place of worship commonly cited (eg.) “acceptance” as decisive, strongly suggesting less positive experiences in the past. In light of these results, a second project was undertaken to develop a conflict-resolution curriculum for people with autism.

Additional information and resources related to autism by David N. Brown are available at

www.autismandreligion.weebly.com

www.evilpossum.weebly.com

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