

New study finds autistic and non-autistic people share more in common than previously understood

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Science in advance of World Autism Day (Saturday 2 April) reveal there are fundamental similarities between autistic and non-autistic people in mental processing.

The brain processes information using two systems; System 1 for quicker intuitive judgements, and System 2 for slower rational thinking. These systems are thought to work differently in autistic people, underlying the difficulties they may experience in everyday life and the workplace.

Yet, a study from the universities of Bath, Cardiff, Manchester, and King's College London reports that these fundamental psychological systems are not impaired in autistic people as once thought. In the largest study of its kind, which involved over 1,000 people, the researchers tested the link between [autism](#) and "quick" intuitive and "slow" rational thinking.

In three experiments, they analyzed the link between autistic personality traits and thinking style. In the fourth, they compared 200 autistic and over 200 non-autistic people. Overall, their results showed that autistic people think as quickly and as rationally as non-autistic people.

The researchers conclude that certain, fundamental mental processes are more similar between autistic and non-autistic people than previously thought. In light of these findings, they call for a shift in the way that society thinks about autism as a mental processing disorder.

They also recommend that it might be important to redesign educational, clinical, and workplace support for autistic people and their families. Support should be much more targeted, instead of assuming that autistic people all have [mental processing](#) difficulties, they say.

The research team argue that the requirement to make 'reasonable

adjustments' in education and commercial organizations, underpinned by the Equality Act, such as allowing extra time in exams and extending deadlines, is not an evidence-based way to support neurodivergent people.

Instead, more fundamental changes might be required, such as changing social and sensory environments and making them more equitable for autistic people to thrive.

Dr. Punit Shah, Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of Bath and the GW4 Neurodevelopmental Neurodiversity Network, explained: "There is a tradition of investigating mental difficulties in autism. While this can be important for developing clinical interventions, there is also a need to understand psychological similarities between different groups.

"The University of Bath is doing ground-breaking work on this, showing that there is often more that unites than divides us, and our new neurodiversity research is another step in this direction.

"Many employers and organizations assume that neurodiversity is simply about celebrating differences between people. But a comprehensive approach to neurodiversity must understand and celebrate similarities between 'neurodivergent' and '[neurotypical](#)' people, too. Not only will our research feed into and improve the design of clinical and educational interventions for autism, it may help to break down stereotypes about how autistic people think and behave, moving us closer towards an evidence-based approach to neurodiversity."

Dr. Shah added: "If we continue telling autistic people and wider society that autistic people 'think differently'—however well-intentioned it might be—that will lead to stereotyping and self-stereotyping, such that autistic people become restricted to thinking in certain ways and

therefore doing certain jobs. Our research doesn't support this idea and, instead, indicates that autistic people often think in a way that is very similar to non-[autistic people](#) and they should not be constrained to certain tasks in educational and workplace settings."

Commenting on the research, Charlotte Valuer, Chair of the Institute of Neurodiversity, said: "This is very interesting research which aligns with much of our work at the Institute of Neurodiversity (ION). We are indeed more alike than different and having research to show that is important. There are so many misconceptions out there and they are best addressed through research which will also help and underpin the work autism self advocates do. ION's purpose is to help us prosper equally to everyone else. Part of that is helping and supporting all of us in our self advocacy so we grow our global voice and agency."

More information: Emily C. Taylor et al, Rethinking fast and slow processing in autism., *Journal of Psychopathology and Clinical Science* (2022). [DOI: 10.1037/abn0000734](https://doi.org/10.1037/abn0000734).

Provided by University of Bath

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