



Could autism make me qualify as a diversity hire?

The Ethicist

BY KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH

I am an academic barely making a living by working as an adjunct for five or six classes a semester. I realize that while the “arc of history bends toward justice,” as Barack Obama said, paraphrasing Martin Luther King Jr., this doesn’t hold true in individual cases. The movement for greater faculty diversity can mean that I, a white male in the humanities, am less likely to get a full-time job no matter how well I teach or how much I publish. A colleague suggested I use the idea of “neurodiversity” to qualify as a “diversity hire.” I have several problems with this: First, while I am obsessive about my chosen subject and was probably “on the spectrum” as a child and young adult, I don’t believe this diagnosis fits me. Second, this would be a sort of black-face: I would be claiming to be part of a protected class for my own benefit. Finally, I don’t think that a hiring committee would look favorably on someone who came out as on the autism spectrum.

Would using an ex post facto diagnosis on the job market give me an unfair advantage? And should “neurodiversity” be included in affirmative-action hiring? Name Withheld

YOU DON’T THINK you’re autistic, and your colleague’s suggestion may have been offered in a cynical or jesting spirit, but let’s explore the proposal. Three major rationales are usually offered for affirmative action on the grounds of race or gender in the academy. The first is to undo histories of unjust exclusion. Does this apply to autism-spectrum disorder? Drawing boundaries around autism is not easy, because it’s a complex category with disputed criteria, but the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that one in 68 schoolchildren

qualifies. (This includes people with “pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified.”) The incidence in older cohorts was much lower, in part because of shifts in definition and reporting. What’s the incidence among full-time academics? Nobody knows. Some people think that especially in math, science and engineering faculties, people with “on the spectrum” traits aren’t rare, and research by the Cambridge psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen lends support to this. Certainly some qualities of mind popularly associated with so-called high-functioning autism — focus, computational ability, a retentive memory, a preference for rational argument over feeling — are useful in most academic fields. What we don’t have is evidence that people with autism-spectrum traits have been excluded from them.

A second rationale for affirmative action is to undo the effects of current



prejudice. Here again, while a diagnostic label can lead people to treat you badly, some of the atypical behavior of high-functioning people with autism is much more likely to be accepted in the academy than in many places. This acceptance is eased by the stereotype of the absent-minded professor with

weak interpersonal skills — that is, someone who fails to conform to the norms of appropriateness recognized by neurotypical people.

A third reason offered for affirmative action is to make sure that all the major social groups and points of view are represented in the academic community. The idea here is both that we can learn from one another and that we want educated people in all the social groups. This could be a reason for wanting more people with autism. They could be rare enough that we need to oversample them (assuming we aren’t already doing so).

So while I’m not finding a strong case for affirmative action for academics on the autism spectrum, I can see a weak one. In the present political climate, though, I doubt that a category of this kind is likely to gain practical support. I don’t know whether you would help your employment prospects by announcing yourself as someone with autism-spectrum disorder (presumably after receiving a formal diagnosis), but under the Americans With Disabilities Act, it would be illegal to discriminate on that basis.

I have a 40-year-old son who is severely autistic; he has limited verbal ability and the mentality of a 4-year-old. He has never voted. But because so many of the issues contested in elections affect him, would it be ethical to request an absentee ballot and cast votes for those people and programs that most benefit him? My wife thinks it’s a bad idea, but I believe it would give him a voice, however small, in his future. Name Withheld

IN A TYPICAL election, the outcome isn’t going to depend on one vote. What you’re doing in voting, then, is expressing your individual preference. A vote taken on behalf of someone else — someone who has interests, for sure, but doesn’t actually have a preference — doesn’t serve that function. What you’re proposing isn’t to give your son a voice; it’s to give yourself two.

A colleague of mine is running for public office. I think he would do a fantastic job, but given the political climate, I think he has no chance of winning. I’ve been asked to donate to his campaign,

The New York Times

INTERNATIONAL EDITION

The New York Times/International Edition
92521 Neuilly Cedex
0033/ 1 41 43 93 22
international.nytimes.com/

Medienart: Print
Medientyp: Tages- und Wochenpresse
Auflage: 110'747
Erscheinungsweise: 6x wöchentlich



Seite: 18
Fläche: 44'997 mm²

Auftrag: 3005687
Themen-Nr.: 536.013

Referenz: 68223702
Ausschnitt Seite: 2/2

but I'm reluctant to do so because I feel I'd be throwing my money away and making it more likely that my party loses the election. I would rather donate to an inferior candidate who might win. Some friends have argued that it's unethical for me to donate to a candidate I think would do a worse job. They also argue that my view contributes to the dysfunction in our electoral system. Do I have an obligation to support the candidate I think is best, even if I'm convinced he'll lose? Name Withheld

GIVING MONEY TO a campaign is, like voting, an expressive act. Like voting, it isn't going to change the outcome, although, also like voting, it's a contribution to the outcome; your money, like your vote, will be a part of the campaign's success or failure. So the key question is what your political aim is: Is it to gain a seat with the best candidate your party can win with, or

is it to lose nobly? If those are the options, you can reasonably express your support for a strategy that would minimize the chances of the worst outcome. It sounds as if your friends simply disagree with your assessments of the probabilities, but you're not obligated to defer to their judgment. You certainly don't have an obligation to support a candidate without regard to her prospects; otherwise, you could write in the name of that marvelous political-science professor you had in freshman year, knowing that she will end up with one lambent, heartfelt vote. In our very divided country, it clearly makes a difference which party has more people in office.

Kwame Anthony Appiah teaches philosophy at N.Y.U. He is the author of "Cosmopolitanism" and "The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen."