

Interviewing autistic adults: adaptations to support recall in police, employment, and healthcare interviews

Jade Norris¹, Laura Crane², Katie Maras¹

¹Centre for Applied Autism Research, Department of Psychology, University of Bath,

²Centre for Research in Autism and Education, UCL Institute of Education

For more information contact: k.l.maras@bath.ac.uk

Background

During many types of interview (for example employment interviews, police interviews, and health and social care consultations) we need to recall detailed memories of specific events that we have experienced, known as *personal specific memories* (see below). For example, in a police interview we may need to describe a crime that we witnessed. In an employment interview, we usually need to provide specific examples of our strengths and skills, such as giving an example of a time we've worked well in a team. In health and social care consultations, we often need to recall the incident that caused our accident, or details relating to how an illness began.

What are personal specific memories? Here's an example of a specific memory of witnessing a crime, containing *relevant details* (about the place, when it happened, the people involved, the actions that occurred, and so on):

'It was about 11.30 on Milsom Street in Bath. I had just sat down at one of the tables outside Café Rouge. It was a very hot day. Very shortly after, I heard some shouting and looked up. There was a man running down the street and what looked like a security guard running after him. The first man was wearing a dark hoodie and jeans, and his face was covered up with something like a scarf. He was holding something in his right hand... I'm not sure what it was.'

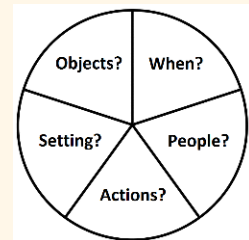
Autistic people often find it difficult to recall specific memories in response to open (very broad) questions. This is the most common type of question used in the situations described above (for example *'tell me what happened on Tuesday'*, *'are you a good team player?'*, or *'how did you hurt your leg?'*). However, research shows that autistic people can recall specific memories when they are asked to with more prompts. Our research tested different types of prompts to see which was most effective in helping autistic people to recall specific memories in interviews relevant to real life contexts, such as being interviewed by the police, employment interviews, and when visiting the doctor.

The study

Autistic and non-autistic adults came to the University of Bath to take part in an interview about their memories. They were asked about situations relating to three contexts: witnessing a crime (places where crimes may occur; e.g., *“tell me about a specific time... when you went to the bank”*); physical or mental health scenarios (e.g., *“tell me about a specific time... when you vomited”*); and employment interviews (e.g., *“tell me about a specific time... when you’ve met a deadline”*).

The different types of prompts we tested were:

- **Open questions:** basic questions with no prompts (e.g., *“tell me about a time when you went to the cinema?”*)
- **Semantic prompting:** a general prompt (e.g., *“do you enjoy going to the cinema?”*) before asking for a specific example (*“tell me about a time when you went to the cinema?”*)
- **Visual-Verbal prompting:** the question provided instructions about the details needed (*“tell me about when it happened, the people who were there, the actions that occurred, the setting, and any objects that were there”*). Participants could see the prompts on a visual pie chart (see image on the right), and used a coin to keep track as they moved between the words (in any order)



Half of the people who took part were given preparation before the appointment, which included receiving the question topics so that they could prepare and bring notes.

The results

Autistic peoples’ memories were less specific than non-autistic people’s memories. However, both groups’ memories were more specific and contained more details about the event when prompts were used in the form of Visual-Verbal prompting. Semantic prompting also helped participants to recall specific memories particularly for employment questions (for example *‘do you work well as part of a team?’* then *‘tell me about a time when you’ve worked as part of a team’*).

Although preparation did not statistically affect how specific and detailed people’s memories were, most participants said that preparation was helpful, for example, in allowing them more thinking time, being able to make notes and use these during the interview, etc.

Implications

Autistic people are more likely to require healthcare, as they often have more physical and mental health conditions than non-autistic people. They are also more likely to interact with police, and are the least likely of all disability groups to be in employment. However, interviewers are often unsure about how to adapt their communication for autistic people, and autistic people are often dissatisfied with the ways that healthcare providers, employers, and the police have communicated with them.

Our study shows that autistic and non-autistic people can recall specific memories when they are prompted to do so. The new Visual-Verbal Prompting technique may be effective for a range of situations. Where possible, interviewers should also give the opportunity for interviewees to prepare in advance, including receiving the questions and as much detail about the interview as possible.