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Autism and driving

The importance of understanding and recognising autism for driving instructors



Summary

More than one in 100 people in the UK are autistic. Despite the prevalence of autism within society, autistic people face barriers in their everyday lives. One example of this is with learning to drive.

Research shows that autistic people are less likely to hold a driving licence than non-autistic people, and they are more likely to have begun learning to drive and then stopped. However, newly qualified autistic drivers have a slightly lower overall crash risk than non-autistic drivers so autistic people should be able to learn to drive.

Currently, driving lessons and tests are not sufficiently adapted for autistic people. Also, driving instructors do not know enough about autism to support autistic people when learning to drive. By adapting the driving and test processes, and educating instructors about autism, we can increase the number of autistic people with driving licences. This will improve the quality of life for autistic people.

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The Problem

Driving is a key skill that can have real impacts on quality of life. The ability to drive gives an individual **more independence** and can **decrease social isolation**. It can also **make access to employment easier**.

Autistic people have reported lack of access to transportation as a barrier to finding employment. Additionally, public transport can be challenging for autistic people. This can be due to timetabling issues, overcrowding, dealing with other people, and sensory challenges.

Despite the clear benefits of having a driving licence, **autistic people are less likely to have a driving licence than non-autistic people**. It is not entirely clear why this is so. Our research has highlighted how limited understanding is in this area, especially in the UK. There is a clear need for research into why autistic people are less likely to hold a licence, and how this can be improved, to increase the number of autistic people with driving licences. In turn, this could **increase their quality of life**.

Recommendations

- A comprehensive programme of research is needed to look at the environmental and societal barriers to driving as an autistic person. Funding for such research needs to be **prioritised**.
- Driving instructors should be **educated about autism and other neurodivergent conditions**. This will allow there to be more tailored support, which is essential to increase the numbers of autistic people with driving licences. This, in turn, will **improve their quality of life**.

Our Research

We asked autistic and non-autistic people about their driving difficulties and their autistic traits in a survey. We then looked at how these difficulties clustered together and how they linked with autistic traits.

We also looked at hazard perception in autistic and non-autistic people using eye tracking whilst they watched videos of road scenes and identified hazards.

Quote

"The stress gets so much that I have to stop, because **the stress of the lessons is impeding the rest of my life.**"

- Autistic person

Our Findings

Three factors emerged from our analyses and each of these factors **related to types of autistic traits**.

Driving Executive reflected the ability to allocate attention and multitask effectively. This was predicted by 'Attention Switching' scores on the autistic traits measure.

Driving Understanding reflected the ability to comprehend different kinds of situations on the road, such as roundabouts. This was predicted by 'Communication' scores on the autistic traits measure.

Driving Social Interaction reflected difficulties in situations that involve other road users, such as getting upset when people don't follow rules. This was also predicted by 'Attention Switching' scores on the autistic traits measure.

- A lower number of autistic people currently held a driving licence than non-autistic people.
- Autistic drivers reported having taken more lessons before passing the driving test than non-autistic drivers.
- Autistic drivers reported experiencing more difficulties in every aspect of driving that was measured in the survey.

Implications

Our findings show how **clinical features of autism can directly relate to outcomes in the real-world**. This suggests that it may be possible to **predict what aspect of driving autistic people need support with based on their specific autistic traits**. Our results also suggest that a "one-size-fits-all" approach to driving lessons is unlikely to be effective for autistic people.

Our hazard perception studies found that autistic people were a little slower in looking at and responding to hazards than non-autistic people, but this was a relatively minor difference.

What is clear from our research is that **many autistic people can, and should be able to, drive**. The difficulties some autistic people have with driving could be addressed with **bespoke training that is based on their individual autistic traits**. Bespoke training would **increase the number of autistic people with driving licences and increase their quality of life**.

Call to Action

"What you need, more than anything else, is to make sure 100% that we get **driving instructors who learn more about autism**....they have got to see it the way we see it, view the road through our eyes"

- Autistic person

References

Curry et al., (2021), Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry

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