

Project summary: Decision-making in Autism Spectrum Conditions

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Decision-making is an important part of every day life: we continuously make decisions ranging from the trivial, such as which sandwich to buy, to decisions that can have significant consequences for our health, relationships and finances.

People with Autism Spectrum Conditions (ASCs) can experience a number of difficulties in their everyday lives. However, the decision-making of people with ASCs has received relatively little scientific attention. This means that there is little guidance available for carers, clinicians, and others who support people with ASCs about ways in which decision-making might be affected by the condition, or suggestions for how they might be better supported. Current guidance is instead weighted heavily towards intellectual (learning) disabilities or dementia; the needs of people with these conditions are, of course, very different to those with ASCs. The aim of our research was to improve understanding of the effects of ASCs on decision-making with the hope that our results might be useful to those who support decision-making in adults with ASCs.

The project was carried out in two phases. In the first phase, we surveyed the decision-making experiences of 120 adults with ASCs. The participants reported a number of difficulties with everyday decision-making. Decision-making was associated with anxiety, feelings of limited confidence, and exhaustion. At the same time, however, some benefits of the condition were identified. These included enhanced logical abilities and good attention to detail.

In the second phase, we used a series of questionnaires and laboratory tests of decision-making to explore in more depth some of the findings from the survey. The participants were 38 adults with ASCs and 40 'neurotypical' adults.

Every participant was of at least average intellectual ability.

Compared with their neurotypical peers, the participants with ASCs reported more frequent difficulties in decision-making. Moreover, those with ASCs were more likely to believe that their condition interfered with, rather than enhanced, the decision-making process. Decisions that needed to be made quickly, or involved a change of routine, or talking to others, were experienced as particularly difficult, and the process of decision-making was reported to be exhausting, overwhelming, and anxiety-provoking. Not surprisingly, the participants with ASCs were more likely to report that they avoided decision-making¹.

The findings from some of the laboratory tests were consistent with the experiences reported. Compared to the neurotypical participants, those with ASCs took longer to make decisions, and gathered more information prior to making decisions, indicating a reduced tolerance of uncertainty. These results may account for some of the decision-related anxiety reported by people with ASCs. However, on one of the tests, the participants with ASCs demonstrated more logical decision-making.

The findings have practical implications for supporting people with ASCs. They suggest that it may be useful to: provide additional time to reach a choice, minimise irrelevant information, present closed questions, offer encouragement and reassurance, address general issues around anxiety, and emphasize some of the strengths in decision-making that ASCs may confer. Such practical suggestions are consistent with legislation in the UK such as the *Mental Capacity Act (England & Wales) 2005*, and elsewhere, which encourages people to participate as much as possible in making decisions about their own lives.

For more information or a copy of the published paper, please email lrl25@cantab.net

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1. Luke, L., Clare, I.C.H., Ring, H., Redley, M., and Watson, P. (in press). Decision-Making Difficulties Experienced by Adults with Autism Spectrum Conditions *Autism*
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