PERCEPTIONS OF PEOPLE WITH AUTISM AND LGBTQ+ IDENTITIES

By

JULIA VICKERS

Submitted to the Psychology Department

School of Natural and Social Sciences

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College

State University of New York

May 9, 2023

Abstract:

The present study investigated the intersectionality between Autistic and LGBTQ+ individuals, as the biases that these groups face. It was hypothesized that those who have intersecting identities, who are a part of both groups, will face more bias than those who belong to only one group or the other. A total of 152 participants were recruited for this study. All participants were instructed to read a total of 4 vignettes and use a 5-point Likert scale to rate positive and negative adjectives about the person described in each vignette. Autistic individuals faced the lowest amount of bias for the positive ratings and faced the highest amount of bias for the negative ratings.

Keywords: Autism, bias, intersectionality, LGBTQ+

Perceptions of People With Autism and LGBTQ+ Identities

There has been a lot of research on the intersection on race, class, and gender, but little research has examined the intersection between Autism and sexual orientation. There are many people in this world who face bias because of who they are, and what societal groups they belong in. The main focus of this study is to examine the intersection between Autism and sexual orientation, and how much bias people who identify as both Autistic and LGBTQ+ face. The current research question is "What biases do people who are autistic and a part of the LGBTQ+ community face?"

Intersectionality In Psychology Research

The theoretical rationale that is used by many psychologists when studying and examining the intersection of multiple social categories outlines 3 main questions: "Who is included within this category?", "What role does inequality play?", and "Where are there similarities?"(Cole, 2009). These questions enable psychologists to conceptualize the influences of these categories (Cole, 2009). These questions can be of much value when used correctly in the research process. There was much research done about the intersectionality between race and gender. It was shown that Black women who faced faced issues of racism and sexism (Sinclair and Taylor, 2002). Another study examined the difference of income between Black and White families that both receive middle class income. It was found that the Black households that had middle class incomes have less far less income than the White families with comparable income, due to the continuation of racial segregation (McCoy, 1999). It was also found that "Black middle- class communities are more likely to be geographically surrounded by poor communities

and have higher rates of crime." (McCoy, 1999). When examining intersectionality, it is important to keep in mind that there is always more than one factor that plays a role in how someone is treated by others, and how they experience life overall. When it comes to people with autistic and LGBTQ+ identities, we must keep in mind that these two identities are overlapping, and this overlap is the thing that creates the intersection.

Changing The Way Psychologists Think About Participants Through Intersectionality

Intersectionality is important to think about when interacting and treating participants. Previous research has found that the way in which psychologists' study and view intersectionality influences the way in which they see the participants that they are studying. One study, done by Dardenne et. Al., focused on "young women who experienced benevolent sexism during a reading span test." (Dardenne et. al.). The results of this study showed that these women displayed brain region activity that is associated with the suppression of intrusive thoughts. A similar study, done by Gervais, Vescio, and Allen in 2011, focused on the "math performance of primarily White, heterosexual college women who were looked at in an objectifying manner by a male confederate." (Gervais, Vescio, and Allen, 2011). Results showed that the performance of these women was "worse than that of their peers who did not experience an objectifying gaze." (Gervais, Vescio and Allen, 2011). A third study was done, that focused on the discrimination of young men and women participants who were African American. These individuals were said to have reported "high levels of perceived race/ethnicity-based discrimination." (Thames et. al., 2013) When compared to an African American woman examiner, these participants had "poorer cognitive processing speed when tested by a White women examiner." (Thames et. al., 2013). These studies reveal that the researcher(s)' conceptual understanding of the intersectional

framework has a large impact on how they understand the participants. When people who have intersectional identities are researched and studied by psychologists, or if they choose to be participants in a study that examines their social group(s), their specific intersectional identities and overlapping of social groups has a major impact on how psychologists view them, and study them while doing research.

Intersectionality as an Opportunity to Promote Social Justice and Equity

Some research has been done about the intersection between women's racial and gender identities. Specifically, the importance of the intersection of race and gender for Black women, and the unique experiences that this intersection creates, including both challenges and benefits, as well as the connections among individual identities, interpersonal interactions, and societal structures. (Rosenthal and Lobel, 2016). A study was done that documented the influence of stereotypes of Black women related to sexuality and motherhood on peoples' perceptions of Black women. (Rosenthal and Lobel, 2016). The studies of Bowleg, Teti, Malebranche, and Tschann (2013) conducted qualitative interviews to explore the experiences of Black gay and bisexual men and low-income Black heterosexual men in the United States.

Both studies revealed complex dynamics involved with intersections of both oppressed and privileged identities, the connections of those identities to inequities and discrimination in societal structures, as well as ways that intersecting experiences of oppression can both harm and provide benefits to individuals. (Rosenthal and Lobel, 2016 and Blowleg, Teti, Malebranche, and Tschann, 2013)

Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex

Crenshaw discusses one case which allows her to explain her point and allow intersectionality to be understood. The court case "DeGraffenreid v. General Motors" is a case in which five Black women sued General Motors, alleging that the employer's seniority system perpetuated the effects of past discrimination against Black women. (Crenshaw,1989). Crenshaw goes on to explain that this company did not hire Black women prior to 1964, and that all of the Black women hired after 1970 had lost their jobs in a seniority-based layoff during a subsequent recession. (Crenshaw, 1989). This company wasn't against hiring Black people, or women, but they did not hire Black women. This shows the importance of intersectionality, because one is not simply just a "Black person" or just a "Woman", but many both Black and a woman. The concept of intersectionality stems from the idea that one's identity has multiple factors and layers, not just one. These factors can include, but are not limited to: race, class, gender, and disability. Because so many are discriminated against based on these multiple layers, the author urges the reader to think about how intersectionality plays a role in everyday life, and why it is so important to understand.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Previous research has been done about sexual orientation and gender identity, and how these things influence how people get treated when it comes to healthcare and other resources. One online survey demonstrated that those with generally favorable attitudes toward LGBTQ+ people were more likely to endorse research investigating genetic contributions to sexual orientation and gender identity. (Gonzalez and Clayton, 2016). The findings that were reported talked about the interviewees' views of the overall risks and benefits, their personal hopes and concerns surrounding genomic research on sexual orientation and/or gender identity, and how genomic research might affect LGBTQ+ populations, and the range of factors affecting the acceptability

of such research. (Gonzlaez and Clayton, 2016). This research shows that there is stigma and bias towards people who identify as LGBTQ+, and this bias influences the perceptions that others have about these individuals. These views and perceptions are also important to recognize when it comes to studying the biases that LGBTQ+ individuals face.

Stigma Towards Autistic Individuals

In the article "What Contributes to Stigma Towards Autistic University Students and Students with Other Diagnoses? (2021), the researchers measured stigma and bias towards autistic individuals by creating an online survey that was conducted that measured certain behaviors through a series of brief vignettes. Each vignette was written to describe a different disorder. Some of the vignettes contained a diagnostic label, and others did not. Two vignettes about autism were included: one about disruptive autism and one about withdrawn autism. Participants were asked to complete a social-distance scale as well as answer open-ended questions about the descriptions of each condition. The results showed that disruptive autistic behaviors lead to far more stigma than withdrawn and non-disruptive autistic behaviors. "Perceived dangerousness predicted Autism stigma." Diagnostic labels were typically less stigmatized than the behaviors themselves. (Gillespie-Lynch, Daou, Obied, Reardon, Khan, and Goldknopf, (2021).

Autism and Intersectionality

When it comes to the topic of Autism and intersectionality, research has shown that "autistic people were more likely than their non-autistic peers to experience early mortality at a mean age of between 53 and 58 years, compared to a mean age of 70 years from causes ranging from suicide to endocrine, circulatory, nervous system, and digestive disorders." (Hirvikoski et

al., 2016). This aligns with findings from a study of 2,368 people (of which 1,156 were autistic) which found that" autistic people were more likely to have non-communicable diseases including, but not limited to, cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and arrhythmia" (Weir et al., 2021). Furthermore, autistic people are more likely to have depression, anxiety, and PTSD (Lai et al., 2019).

All the studies exemplify how intersectionality deepens our understanding of complex, dynamic psychological experiences of diverse individuals while drawing attention to structural oppression and calling for the promotion of social justice and equity. If intersectionality is not fully understood, we cannot expect to fully be able to study and research these topics and social groups without having a certain bias or attitude towards them.

These findings show that the intersectionality between certain social groups can have a major impact of how people act, and how others perceive that person. Many of these findings do not directly address the research question that is being asked, however, the findings do show that autistic and LGBTQ+ individuals do face a certain amount of bias from others. Based on the research that was reviewed, the intersectionality between autistic and LGBTQ+ individuals still needs to be measured and examined.

In order to examine how these characteristics are perceived, alone and intersectionally, participants read a series of vignettes related to both Autism and sexual orientation. There was one vignette related strictly to Autism, one related strictly to sexual orientation, one related to both, and one related to neither, that was used as a control. After participants read the vignettes, they read and answered questions using five-point Likert scales. The independent variables were the four conditions of the study (Each different topic for the vignettes). The dependent variables were the positive and negative ratings with the adjectives. The five adjectives that were grouped

for the positive ratings were “friendly”, “intelligent”, “extroverted”, “sincere”, and “relatable”. The five adjectives that were grouped for the negative ratings were “aggressive”, “unaware”, “apathetic”, and “intimidating”. The participants’ responses of all participants. The participants self-reported their answers, and these answers were used to measure the amount of bias that the people in these groups face. It is hypothesized that people who are in both of these groups will face more bias than those who are in just either one group or the other.

Methods

Participants:

A total of 152 participants were recruited through Prolific, an online survey platform used for collecting data. A total of 75 men and 77 women were recruited for this study. Participants who identified as being on the autism spectrum or being a part of the LGBTQ+ community were excluded. A total of 17 participants were excluded for various reasons: they either identified as being autistic or LGBTQ+, they didn’t finish the survey, they finished too quickly, or they failed 2 out of the 4 attention checks.

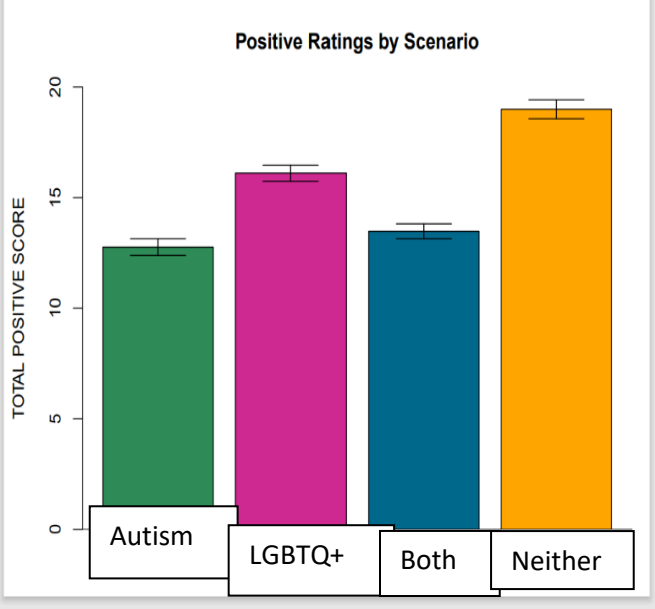
Materials:

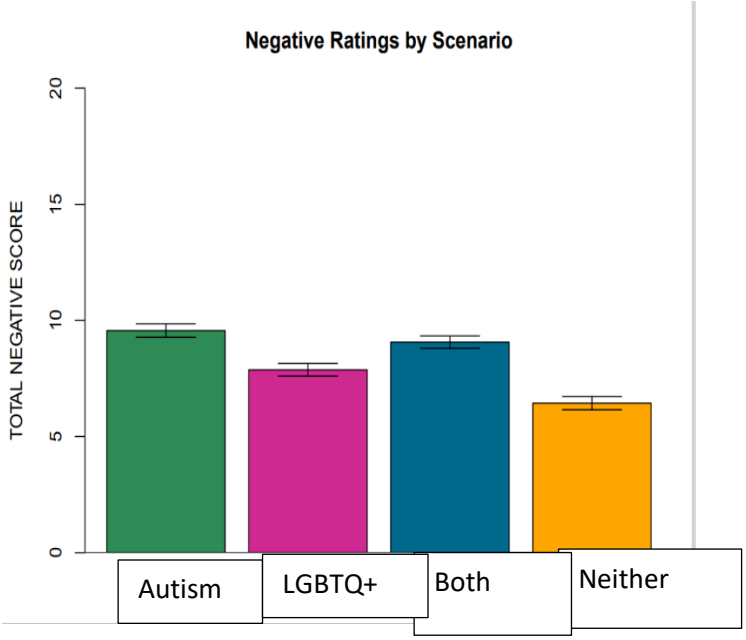
The materials used for this study included Vignettes with corresponding adjectives as well as a 5-point Likert scale that was used to measure participants’ responses. The survey was administered through Prolific, an online platform used for collecting data. The responses were self-reported, and all participants filled out the survey online, using a laptop, computer, or smartphone.

Procedure:

In order to collect the data, a total of 152 participants were recruited through Prolific, an online survey platform used for collecting data. After completing an informed consent form and a demographic questionnaire, all participants were instructed to read 4 separate vignettes and rate certain adjectives on a 5-point Likert scale (see Appendix A). The adjectives that were used for the positive ratings were “friendly”, “intelligent”, “extroverted”, “sincere”, and “relatable”. The adjectives that were used for the negative ratings were “aggressive”, “unaware”, “apathetic”, “awkward”, and “intimidating”. The independent variables were the four conditions of the study (the topics for the vignettes). The dependent variables were the ratings of the 10 adjectives that were used (the positive and the negative ratings). The vignettes and scales were all administered through Qualtrics, and the data was analyzed through Excel and JASP.

Results:


Positive Ratings by Scenario
TOTAL POSITIVE SCORE
0
5
10
15
20
Autism
LGBTQ+
Both
Neither


Negative Ratings by Scenario
TOTAL NEGATIVE SCORE
0
5
10
15
20
Autism
LGBTQ+
Both
Neither

First, a within-subjects Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) with Scenario as a within-subjects factor was conducted to examine the effects of autism and sexual orientation on positive ratings. Results indicated that there was a significant main effect of scenario for positive was a significant main effect of scenario for positive ratings, $F(3,450) = 219.16, p < 0-.001)$.

Secondly, a within-subjects ANOVA with Scenario as a within-subjects factor was conducted to examine the effects of autism and sexual orientation on negative ratings. Results indicated that there was a significant main effect of scenario for negative ratings. Both of these results show that autistic individuals faced the lowest amount of bias for the positive ratings, and the highest amount of bias for the negative ratings.

Discussion:

In this study, we hypothesized that people who identify as both autistic and LGBTQ+ would face more bias than those who just belong to one group or the other. The present study was the first to explore the intersection between autistic individuals and those individuals who identify as LGBTQ+. We did this by measuring the biases that these two groups face through a series of vignettes and ratings from participants.

The results of this study showed that autistic individuals received the lowest number of positive ratings and the highest number of negative ratings. This study had many limitations and questions for future research. One of the limitations of this study was the fact that each vignette was about a different scenario. Because of each vignette being different, the results have been influenced. Another limitation of this study was that the fourth vignette was posed and written as a more positive experience rather than a neutral experience. Because of this, the data may have been skewed.

This research also posed many questions for future researchers. In this experiment, we measured how people who do not belong to certain groups have bias towards groups that intersect. However, if it were the opposite, how would the results be different?

Another question that could direct future research is that, if we were to measure gender identity instead of sexual orientation would the results have changed? By doing this study and asking these questions, this will allow future researchers to study, examine, and discuss the implications and meaning behind the results and data.

References:

Botha, Monique, Gillespie-Lynch, Kristen "Come As You Are: Examining Autistic Identity Development and the Neurodiversity Movement Through an Intersectional Lens" (2022)

Come as You Are: Examining Autistic Identity Development and the Neurodiversity Movement through an Intersectional Lens | Human Development | Karger Publishers

Crenshaw, Kimberle "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critque of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" (1989) Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics (uchicago.edu)

Cole, Elizabeth "Intersectionality and Research in Psychology" (2009) cole_am_psych_intersectionality.pdf (umich.edu)

Gillespie-Lynch, Kristen, Daou, Nidal, Obeid, Rita, Reardon, Siobhan, Khan, Spogmay, Goldknopf, Emily "What Contributes to Stigma Towards Autistic University Students and Students with Other Diagnoses?" (2021) What Contributes to Stigma Towards Autistic University Students and Students with Other Diagnoses? - Research Library: Social Sciences - ProQuest

Hammack-Aviran, Catherine, Eilmus, Ayden, Diehl, Carolyn, Gottlieb, Keanan, Gonzalez, Gilbert, Davis, Lea, Clayton, Ellen "LGBTQ+ Perspectives on Conducting Genomic Research on Sexual Identity Orientation and Gender Identity" (2016) LGBTQ+ Perspectives on Conducting Genomic Research on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity - PMC (nih.gov)

McCormick-Huhn, Kaitlin, Warner, Leah, Settles, Isis, Shields, Stephanie "What If Psychology Took Intersectionality Seriously? Changing How Psychologists Think About Participants" (2019) Rosenthal, Lisa "Incorporating Intersectionality Into Psychology: An Opportunity to Promote Social Justice and Equity" (2016) *What If Psychology Took Intersectionality Seriously? Changing How Psychologists Think About Participants - Kaitlin McCormick-Huhn, Leah R. Warner, Isis H. Settles, Stephanie A. Shields, 2019 (sagepub.com)*

Appendix A:

Please read the following vignettes and answer the questions that follow.

Scenario 1:

When this person gets home from school, their mom asks them to run errands at the store. Their mom gives them a written list and tells them where to find the groceries. When they arrive at the store, the environment is exceedingly overwhelming. The lights are too bright, there are far too many people around, and the noise of the check-out machines, the automatic sliding doors, and the chit-chat of others proves to be far too much. They quickly look around before deciding that they cannot function in this environment. They decide to leave the store. When they gets in their car, they cannot seem to gather their thoughts, and their body is shaking. They, nor their mother, knew what challenges They would face when going to the store.

Please rate the person below on the following:

Friendly:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately

4. Very
5. Extremely

Intelligent:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Extroverted:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Sincere:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately

4. Very
5. Extremely

Relatable:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Aggressive:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Unaware:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Apathetic:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Awkward:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Intimidating:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Masculine:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Feminine:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Would you be willing to donate any of the money you earn from this study to an organization that supports people with autism?

YES NO

If so, how much are you willing to donate? (Please indicate the amount in dollars and/or cents, e.g., 1.50)

Scenario 2:

On the first day of school, while walking to their class with their partner, this person noticed that something was different than usual. They were receiving stares and odd looks from their classmates as they and their partner walked down the hall. The next day, when they walked to class alone, because their partner was absent from school, they noticed that all the stares were gone. They had no shame in having a same sex partner, however, they noticed that other people did. They continued to walk to class with their partner all the other days, and each day, everyone stared and made faces at them, but they were completely unfazed. They decided that even though others were not happy with the relationship that this person had, they were happy, and that was all that mattered.

Please rate the person below on the following:

Friendly:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately

4. Very
5. Extremely

Intelligent:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Extroverted:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Sincere:

1.Not at all

2.Slightly

3.Moderately

4. Very

5. Extremely

Relatable:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Aggressive:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly

3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Unaware:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Apathetic:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Awkward:

1. Not at all

2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Intimidating:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Masculine:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Feminine:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Would you be willing to donate any of the money you earn from this study to an organization that supports people from the LGBTQ+ community?

YES NO

If so, how much are you willing to donate? (please indicate the amount in dollars and/or cents, e.g., 1.50)

Scenario 3:

After finally making the choice to go to the homecoming party, this person decided to call their partner to let them know. The party was going to start at 8:00 pm, after the football game. When they got into their partner's car, they knew that this would be a challenge for them. Not only would they be faced with the discrimination of their peers due to their same sex relationship with their partner, but they also knew that parties tended to be very loud, and overstimulating for people like them. When they and their partner arrived at the party together, this person found it very difficult to talk to others and fit in. It was too loud, people were staring, and it was all too much for them to handle.

Please rate the person below on the following:

Friendly:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Intelligent:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately

4. Very
5. Extremely

Extroverted:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Sincere:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Relatable:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately

4. Very
5. Extremely

Aggressive:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Unaware:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Apathetic:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Awkward:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Intimidating:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Masculine:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very

5. Extremely

Feminine:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Would you be willing to donate any of the money you earn from this study to an organization that supports people from the LGBTQ+ community?

YES NO

If so, how much are you willing to donate? (please indicate the amount in dollars and/or cents, e.g., 1.50)

Scenario 4:

After weeks of planning, this person was excited to have a nice dinner out with their friends Since all of their schedules were busy, they had not seen their friends in a while and were looking forward to it. When they got to the restaurant, they ordered their favorite dish, and ate a delicious dessert. Once the dinner was over, this person made sure that they got more opportunities like this to spend time with their friends, because this person knew that it was important to spend time with people they cared about.

Please rate the person below on the following:

Friendly:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Intelligent:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly

3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Extroverted:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Sincere:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Relatable:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Aggressive:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Unaware:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Apathetic:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Awkward:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Intimidating:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Masculine:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Feminine:

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Moderately
4. Very
5. Extremely

Would you be willing to donate any of the money you earn from this study to an organization that supports people with autism and the LGBTQ+ community?

YES NO

If so, how much are you willing to donate? (please indicate the amount in dollars and/or cents, e.g., 1.50)