



Perspectives on Employer-Initiated Terminations Among Young Adults on the Autism Spectrum

Florencia Pezzimenti¹ · Eman Durrani¹ · Shuting Zheng² · Ryan E. Adams³ · Somer L. Bishop² · Julie Lounds Taylor^{1,4}

Accepted: 18 December 2022 / Published online: 10 January 2023

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Abstract

Job instability is high among autistic adults, with employer-initiated terminations a common reason for job loss. The current study used qualitative methods to code reasons that autistic adults identified for their employer-initiated termination. From 315 autistic individuals ages 18–35 who completed an online survey, 93 (29.5%) reported having been terminated from a job. These individuals were asked about the reasons for their termination and responses were coded into thematic categories. Common reasons included work performance, social difficulties, attendance, and mental health challenges. Adults were more likely to attribute terminations to internal causes (related to the individual) than to external causes (environment-related). A good fit between workplace, individual preferences, skills, and abilities is likely key to promoting job continuity for autistic adults.

Keywords Autism · Employer-initiated termination · Employment · Fired · Job · Work

Over the last decade, a growing body of literature has investigated employment among adults on the autism spectrum. Though employment outcomes are variable in this group, with many adults successfully working (e.g., Baldwin et al., 2014; Harvery et al., 2021), employment challenges are extremely common. Autistic individuals have lower employment rates compared to peers in the general population (Hendricks, 2010; Howlin & Moss, 2012; Taylor & Seltzer, 2011) or with other disabilities (Shattuck et al., 2012). Those who are working often experience reduced working hours, overrepresentation in low-pay and entry

level positions, lack of supports or accommodations from employers, and frequent job disruptions (Baldwin et al., 2014; Carter et al., 2012; Eaves & Ho, 2008). In addition to difficulties finding employment, job instability is common among individuals with autism. For example, Taylor, Henninger and Mailick (2015) found that about two-thirds of autistic adults without an intellectual disability (ID) were employed or in a post-secondary educational program at some point over their 10-year study, but only one-quarter of adults were consistently participating in these activities over time. Further, Taylor & DaWalt (2017) found that, in a sample of transition-aged youth on the autism spectrum, one-half experienced disruptions in their work, vocational, or educational activities within the first three years after leaving high school. One common disruption in that sample was employer-initiated terminations.

While employer-initiated terminations¹ are a frequent occurrence among autistic adults, few studies have explored autistic adults' perceptions of these terminations. It is critical to understand circumstances around employer-initiated

✉ Julie Lounds Taylor
julie.l.taylor@vumc.org

¹ Department of Pediatrics, Vanderbilt University Medical Center, Nashville, TN, USA

² Weill Institute for Neurosciences, Department of Psychiatry and Behavior Sciences, University of California, San Francisco, CA, USA

³ Division of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics, Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, Cincinnati, OH, USA

⁴ Vanderbilt Kennedy Center, Vanderbilt University Medical Center, Nashville, TN, USA

¹ Though “employer-initiated terminations” can include different types of involuntary job separations instigated by employers (e.g., getting fired, being laid off, forced resignation, induced retirement, etc.), in this paper, we use the term to refer to job separations due to being fired by an employer.

termination in this group, as continuous vocational failures negatively affect their finances, independence, quality of life and mental health (Fleming et al., 2013; Gerhardt & Lainer, 2011; Wanberg, 2012). When describing recurrent job terminations, adults on the autism spectrum reported feelings of depression, isolation, low self-worth and frustration (Müller et al., 2008). Furthermore, frequent terminations might lead to a state of permanent unemployment and increased reliance on government assistance (Krieger et al., 2012; Roux et al., 2013). Identifying potential factors associated with job instability, especially related to employer-initiated terminations, among autistic individuals may provide new insights about how to support them in the workplace.

Though under-researched in autism samples, previous studies have examined reasons for job loss among other vulnerable populations, including those with disabilities or serious mental illness (e.g., schizophrenia and related psychotic disorders, bipolar and severe mood disorders, substance abuse/dependence, personality disorders). There is variability in how types of job loss are reported and analyzed, but studies generally find that 40–50% of job losses in supported employment among adults with serious mental illness are initiated by the employer. This includes terminations, temporary job endings, or being laid off (Becker et al., 1998; Cook & Burke-Miller, 2015). Similar results were found in a study of adults with a range of disabilities (most frequently ID) participating in supported employment, in which nearly 40% of job separations were terminations initiated by the employer (West et al., 2015).

There is some evidence suggesting that reasons for job loss in these groups are different than what would be expected in the general population. For example, in the general population, job loss is more common among individuals who have lower-skilled or lower quality jobs (Kaye & Nightingale, 2000; Milner et al., 2018). Even though adults with disabilities or serious mental illness are more likely than those in the general population to have these types of jobs, the high rates of job loss in these groups are not accounted for by job characteristics such as the required skill level or quality (Cook & Burke-Miller, 2015; Milner et al., 2018). Instead, commonly-described reasons for losing a job – and particularly for employer-initiated terminations – include interpersonal problems, worsening or onset of psychiatric symptoms, dissatisfaction with work, low work quality, poor attendance, and medical challenges (Becker et al., 1998; Lagomarcino, 1990; West et al., 2015). Characteristics of the workplace, such as a lack of willingness or ability of employers to provide appropriate supports/accommodations or poor communication in the workplace, also likely contribute to job loss (Gould-Werth et al., 2018; H. S. Kaye et al., 2011).

Understanding reasons for employer-initiated terminations among autistic adults can also be informed by studies examining general facilitators and barriers to employment in this group (e.g., Black et al., 2020; Bury et al., 2021; Harmuth et al., 2018; Hayward et al., 2016; Lorenz et al., 2016). For example, extant literature suggests that open communication channels, clear expectations about duties and responsibilities, social supports, and inclusive environments are associated with positive employment outcomes for adults with autism (Harvery et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2020; Scott et al., 2015). Other factors associated with long-term workplace success in this group include having a job that is a good match for an individual's skills and interests, knowledge and understanding of autism from employer and coworkers, and a supportive work environment that recognizes and adjusts to the individual needs of the autistic adult (Dreaver et al., 2020; Hedley et al., 2018). It is important to understand when lack of these elements on the job may increase the chances of a termination for an autistic adult.

One promising framework through which to understand autistic adults' perceptions about why they were terminated from a job is Weiner's attribution theory (1985), which proposes that events can be perceived as having either an internal (i.e., due to an individual's own characteristics) or external (i.e., due to outside events or factors) locus of control. According to Weiner, "success and failure perceived as due to internal causes such as personality, ability, or effort respectively raises or lowers self-esteem or self-worth, whereas external attributions for positive or negative outcomes do not influence feelings about the self" (Weiner, 1985, p. 560). In the general population, those who identified internal causes as the reasons for their unemployment had lower self-esteem and hopelessness scores relative to those who gave external reasons (Winefield et al., 1992). Similarly, a study exploring internal and external attributions for job loss in a sample of 126 employed adults who met criteria for a psychiatric diagnosis (mood, anxiety, schizophrenia and/or other disorders based on the DSM-IV) found that the majority of participants cited external reasons (Lanctôt et al., 2013). However, almost three quarters (73%) of that sample had voluntarily ended their jobs (Lanctôt et al., 2013). Given the general lack of knowledge about neurodiversity among employers (Solomon, 2020) and the challenges autistic adults experience receiving appropriate workplace supports (Gould-Werth et al., 2018; Kaye et al., 2011), we expect the frequency of external attributions for terminations to be similarly high among autistic adults.

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of the analytic sample (n = 93)

	%	(n)
Gender		
Male	58.1	54
Female	35.5	33
Non-binary	5.4	5
Other ^a	1.1	1
Race		
White	83.9	78
African American or Black	3.2	3
Asian	2.2	2
Other	1.1	1
More than one race	9.7	9
Ethnicity		
Hispanic/Latino	7.5	7
Non-Hispanic/Latino	92.5	86
Employment status		
Employed	65.6	61
Not employed	34.4	32
Marital status		
Not currently married	78.5	73
Currently married	21.5	20
Children		
No children	79.6	74
Children	20.4	19
Currently in school		
In school	18.3	17
Not in school	81.7	76
Highest level of education		
High school diploma or less	34.4	32
Some college but not 4-year degree	37.6	35
4-year degree or more	28.	26
Benefits		
Receiving state or federal benefits	38.7	36
Not receiving benefits	57	53
Not sure or missing	4.3	4

^a The person who endorsed “other” for gender wrote in “Transgender man with feminine gender expression.”

Current Study

In this paper, we fill an important gap in the literature by examining employer-initiated terminations and the perceived reasons for them among adults with autism. The following research questions were addressed:

1. What do young adults with autism perceive as the reason(s) why they experienced an employer-initiated termination?
2. Using attribution theory, are the perceived reasons for employer-initiated terminations more likely to reflect internal (related to the individual) or external (related to others or to the environment) attributions about the termination?

Methods

Participants

Young adults with autism were recruited through the Simons Foundation Powering Autism Research for Knowledge (SPARK Consortium) research match registry (Feliciano et al., 2018) for a larger study on life experiences and mental health. Email invitations to participate in this study were sent to independent adults (i.e., legally responsible for oneself) in the SPARK registry who met the following criteria: (1) able to self-report and previously completed the SPARK Medical and Background history questionnaire; (2) ages 18 to 35 years; and (3) received an autism diagnosis from a professional before age 18.

Invitations were sent to 700 eligible SPARK registrants in early March of 2020 (just prior to social distancing restrictions in the US due to COVID-19). Complete surveys were obtained from 315 participants within eight days, through two waves of email invitations (a 46% response rate). Characteristics of the full sample are presented in Zheng et al., 2021. Of those individuals, 93 (29.5%) reported that they had been terminated from a job and thus, make up the analytic sample. Autistic adults in this sample averaged 28.43 (SD=4.30) years of age. Just over 50% (57%, n=53) were male, and 81.7% (n=76) were White and non-Hispanic. Just over one-quarter (28.0%, n=26) had attained a bachelor’s degree or higher, and 18.3% (n=17) were currently in school. Nearly 40% (38.7%, n=36) were receiving state or federal disability benefits. Full characteristics of the analytic sample are presented in Table 1.

Measures

The online survey was developed by our team and included information on mental health and potential contributors to mental health (including employment experiences).

Dependent Variable: Employer-Initiated Terminations All participants were asked “Have you ever been fired by an employer? (Yes / No)” Those who answered affirmatively (N=93) were asked to explain the reason in an open-ended question (“What do you think is the reason?”).

Demographic Variables Demographic information (used for sample characterization) was collected when participants signed up for SPARK and in the survey developed by our team. Information was obtained on date of birth (to calculate age), gender, race, ethnicity, highest level of completed education, whether the adults were currently in school, current employment status, marital status, whether

they had children, and whether they received any federal or state benefits (see Table 1).

Analysis

Qualitative analysis was used to code reasons for employer-initiated terminations on two dimensions: thematic categories and attribution. The coding and analysis were performed using Microsoft Office programs (Word and Excel). To address Research Question 1, we used a coding reliability approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) to classify the responses that participants gave for employer-initiated terminations into commonly mentioned thematic categories. Thematic analysis was selected because our analytical sample was large and composed of open-ended written responses (rather than interviews). Given the limited extant research on employer-initiated terminations among autistic adults, we determined the coding reliability approach to be more appropriate than reflexive approaches, as our main focus was on identifying evidence for themes (Braun & Clark, 2021). By taking an inductive orientation, we were able to consider the wide range of reasons given by adults with autism, instead of selecting variables a priori that we, as researchers, suspected may have contributed to employment terminations. The first author read through each response and developed a codebook that captured the main topics included in the responses (see Table 2 for a full list of thematic categories). The research team reviewed and revised the categories, after which the codebook was finalized. Then, two independent coders (the first and second author) reviewed all open-ended responses and assigned a thematic category to each response on their own, based on the codebook. After all codes had been assigned by both coders, coding discrepancies were identified and resolved through consensus discussion between coders and, when necessary, the rest of the research team (15 disagreements out of 93 codes assigned, 84% reliable). Each open-ended response ($n=93$) was assigned to only one category. Although some responses could potentially fit under more than one category (e.g., “autistic social deficits that rendered me unable to understand unspoken expectations in the workplace” could fit the *Social Difficulties* or *Autism* categories), the primary reason (main theme of the overall response) for the employer-initiated termination was used to determine the category to which the response was assigned (in the previous example, *Social Difficulties*). Frequencies for each category were tabulated.

Second, we used a coding reliability approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) for Research Question 2. In this case, we took a deductive orientation, coding the open-text responses based on Weiner’s (1985) attribution theory.

Specifically, we coded responses into four mutually exclusive categories: *internal* (referred to the individual’s own characteristics or self); *external* (related to environment, other people, or otherwise outside of the individual); *mixed* (responses that conveyed both internal and external reasons such as “attendance and coworker dispute”); or *unable to code* for responses that lacked information to code in one of the three previously mentioned categories (e.g., “Not sure”). A codebook was developed based on attribution theory, and the same two coders independently assigned codes to each individual response, and then resolved coding discrepancies (14 disagreements out of 93 codes assigned, 85% reliable) through consensus discussion amongst the team. Frequencies for each category were generated.

Results

Research Question 1: Self-Reported Reasons for Employer-Initiated Terminations

We identified 13 categories of reasons people gave for being terminated from a job. Figure 1 shows the frequency distribution for each category, and Table 2 presents deidentified examples of responses that were coded in each category. Brief descriptions of each category are presented below.

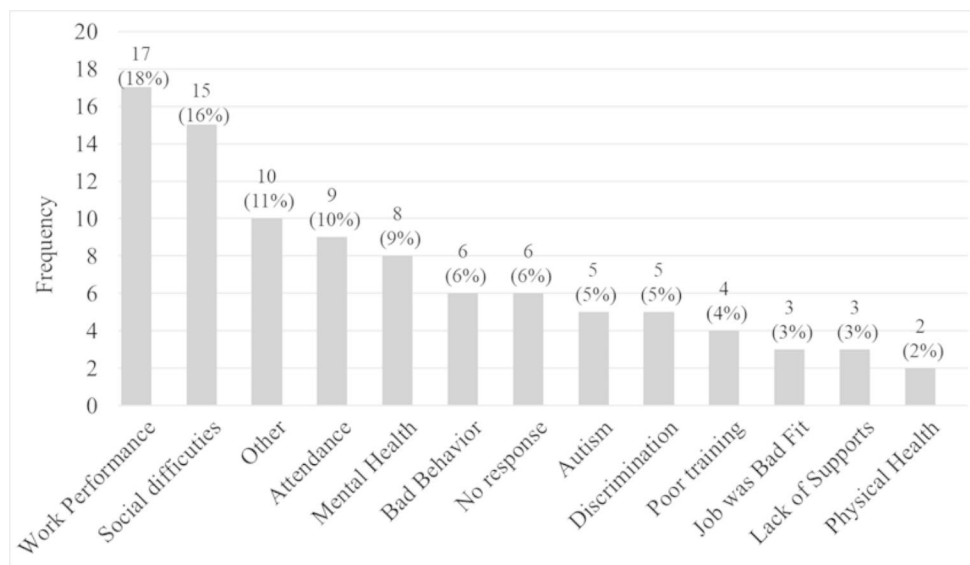
Work Performance The most common theme that emerged focused on one’s own ability to perform at the job, often reflecting challenges completing required tasks. For example, one individual recalled: “I wasn’t fast enough physically, and mentally, I couldn’t learn fast enough.” Some others described how work performance was affected more so by the work environment rather than themselves. For example, one adult noted how they “w[ere] not working at a skill level that employer had expected me to start working at.” Importantly, responses in this category generally did not reflect a decline in performance over time, but consistent challenges that perhaps could have been anticipated or accommodated, as conveyed in responses citing the respondent’s “work speed” or “slow pace.” Approximately 18% of individuals reported a reason related to work performance for their termination.

Social difficulties The second most frequent category of reasons for employer-initiated terminations, at 16%, focused on social difficulties. Some participants noted general challenges in social skills that lead to being terminated, such as their “lack of communication skills,” and failing to recognize and respond to “social cues.” Other individuals described the situations in which they were terminated in greater specificity, and how those situations were influenced

Table 2 Examples of responses given to the question about reasons for being terminated by an employer, organized by thematic category and causal attribution

Thematic Category	Examples of responses that were coded under the thematic category	Causal attribution
Attendance	Constantly being late.	Internal
	Attendance was the issue.	Internal
	My ability to come to work was not too great.	Internal
Autism	My diagnosis.	Internal
	My autism.	Internal
	I am autistic.	Internal
Bad Behavior	Walking out on the job and/or being “no call no show.”	Internal
	I was not on my best behavior.	Internal
	Insubordination.	Internal
	Misuse of social media.	Internal
Discrimination	The reason that they told me is that I am too literal, not picky, and once [supervisor changed], they turned fluorescent light to the brightest, lied about accommodation they never did, and purposely change meeting schedules without telling me. They knew sudden changes give me sensory issues. They ignored me. Discriminations are very harsh at the place.	External
	Discrimination against my autism.	External
	They stated they were uncomfortable with me being on the spectrum.	External
	Didn’t understand me/ didn’t want to deal with me.	External
Job was a bad fit	Bad fit for the culture was what I was told.	External
	Worked at a drug and mental health rehab. Was not a good fit.	Internal
	Just wasn’t the right job to go into.	Internal
Lack of accommodations	They could not accommodate my disabilities.	External
	Refused to provide the accommodations.	External
Mental Health	Directly related to mental health and anxiety/depression.	Internal
	Untreated psychotic break [...caused that] I didn’t make it into work when I was supposed to show up. [...]	Internal
	I was afraid I would jump in front of the bus, so I just didn’t ride the bus that often at all.	Internal
	My depression kept me from going in most days.	Internal
Other	My mental health issues. I am bipolar and have borderline personality disorder.	Internal
	Lay off.	External
	Safety concerns.	External
	Nepotism.	External
	Personal mistakes.	Internal
	I don’t know.	Unable to code
Physical Health	Due to unforeseen medical problems related to my diabetes.	External
	Health issues.	External
Poor Training	It was at a restaurant. I wasn’t fast enough at the food prep and my manager was unwilling to train me.	Mixed
	Poor training, and other circumstances outside of my control.	External
	Was not trained correctly.	External
	Lack of training.	External
Social Difficulties	[...] On my first day I apparently talked down to one of my supervisors when I really just had a question in regards to how to do my job. I made him cry and was fired.	Mixed
	Irreconcilable differences and change due to buyout. Could not adapt to new rules/change in management.	Mixed
	[...] I remember that a customer was angry about something I had no control over (the kitchen was out of something) he yelled at me and I started crying and could not stop so I was let go.	External
	They didn’t understand me.	External
	My “personality” and “weirdness.”	Internal
	Social cues.	Internal
Work Performance	My lack of communication skills.	Internal
	I wasn’t fast enough physically, and mentally, I couldn’t learn fast enough.	Mixed
	Failed to meet sales quota.	Mixed
	I wasn’t able to perform tasks as expected.	Mixed
	Not meeting time expectations and disagreement with management.	Mixed
	Was not working at skill level that employer had expected me to start working at.	External
	Work speed.	Internal
Slow pace.	Internal	

Fig. 1 Frequency of each thematic category of reasons for termination



by their social difficulties. For example, one participant went into detail as to how “on my first day, I apparently talked down to one of my supervisors when I really just had a question in regard to how to do my job. I made him cry and was fired.” Another one recalled “[...] I remember that a customer was angry about something I had no control over (the kitchen was out of something), he yelled at me and I started crying and could not stop, so I was let go.”

Attendance This category included reasons that were specific to attendance. Responses in this category generally pertained to either not being on time or missing their shift entirely. For example, one participant noted “constantly being late”, whereas another participant noted “my ability to come to work was not great”. Approximately 10% of individuals reported a reason related to attendance for their termination.

Mental Health This theme focused on mental health as the cited cause for being terminated. Many adults described mental health problems that in turn affected their ability to work. For example, one participant described how “my depression kept me from going in most days”. Others directly cited mental health issues or diagnoses. One participant noted that the reason for being terminated was “directly related to mental health and anxiety/depression,” while another answered “my mental health issues. I am bipolar and have borderline personality disorder.” One respondent provided details on a mental health crisis to which they seemed to attribute the termination: “Untreated psychotic break [...caused that] I didn’t make it into work when I was supposed to show up. [...] I was afraid I would jump in front of the bus, so I just didn’t ride the bus that often at all.”

Approximately 9% of adults had a response that fit into this category.

Bad behavior This category included reasons for termination related to bad behavior in the workplace. Responses from individuals in this category generally pertained to non-compliance with workplace standards. One participant noted “insubordination”, and another individual noted “misuse of social media”. Another described the behavior that led to the termination: “Walking out on the job and being a no call no show.” Approximately 6% of individuals reported a reason related to bad behavior for employer-initiated terminations.

Less frequent responses The remaining categories were endorsed by 5% or fewer of the adults in this study. Approximately 5% of individuals cited their *autism*, specifically, as the reasons why they were terminated. Responses coded in this category included mention of either the adult’s diagnosis or their autism. For example, short responses like “my autism” “I’m autistic,” and “my diagnosis” were coded here. Another 5% of participants in this sample cited *discrimination* in the workplace as the reason why they experienced an employer-initiated termination. Some participants specifically named discrimination in their response. For example, one individual cited “discrimination against my autism”, while another provided additional details about what they experienced: “the reason that they told me is that I am too literal, not picky, and once [supervisor changed], they turned fluorescent light to the brightest, lied about accommodations they never did, and purposely changed meeting schedules without telling me. They knew sudden changes give me sensory issues. They ignored me. Discriminations are very harsh at the place.”. Other participants did not directly name discrimination but rather cited examples

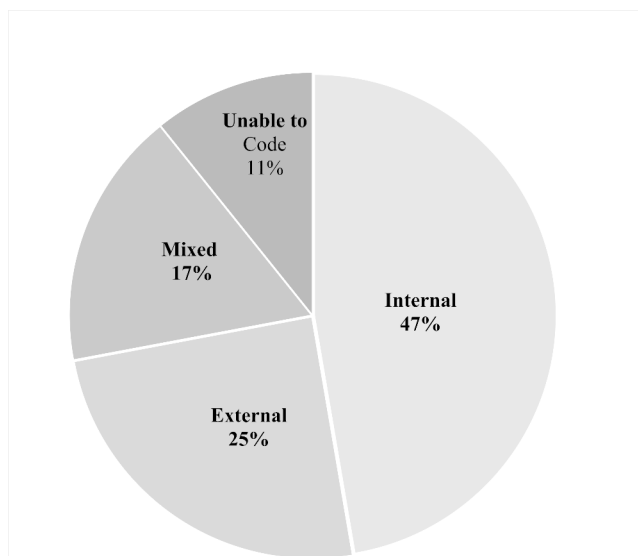


Fig. 2 Frequency of causal attributions for employer-initiated terminations

of it: “They stated they were uncomfortable with me being on the spectrum,” and “[they] didn’t understand me, didn’t want to deal with me.”

Approximately 4% of adults had responses that were coded as *poor training*, which could reflect either a lack of training or improper training. One individual noted not only a lack of training, but the effects of it: “it was at a restaurant. I wasn’t fast enough at the food prep and my manager was unwilling to train me.” Another infrequent category, at 3% of the sample, was explicit mention of a *bad fit* with either the work itself or other related factors like the work environment. Some participants cited the work culture as the reason for their termination. One participant recalled having “worked at a drug and mental health rehab.” This participant went on to add that it “was not a good fit.” Other infrequent categories included *lack of supports* (3%), which directly referenced either a refusal or inability from the employer to provide accommodations, and *physical health* (2%), in which the adults included specific and direct references to physical health in their responses. For example, one individual noted circumstances “due to unforeseen medical problems related to my diabetes”, while another simply answered “health issues.”

Other Finally, approximately 11% of adults provided various responses that could not be coded into one of the above categories. Responses from individuals ranged from “lay off” to “Nepotism”, or even saying that they did not know why they were terminated.

Research Question 2: Attributions for Employer-Initiated Terminations

Frequency of attribution categories Next, we coded reasons for being terminated by an employer into one of four mutually-exclusive categories: internal, external, mixed, or unable to code. Examples of responses that would fit into each attribution category are presented in Table 2. Frequencies of responses coded into each category are presented in Fig. 2. Nearly one-half of the adults ($n=44$) attributed the reason why they were terminated as *internal*, with individuals saying that they were terminated because “I was not on my best behavior”, or because of “personal mistakes” and “my personality and weirdness.” One-quarter of the adults ($n=23$) attributed being terminated from a job to *external* reasons. For example, one participant said that they were terminated due to “poor training, and other circumstances outside of my control.” Others cited “safety concerns” or “bad fit for the culture was what I was told” as external reasons of their termination.

Nearly 20% ($n=16$) provided *mixed* responses, including both internal and external reasons for their termination. For example, one individual cited “irreconcilable differences and change due to buyout. Could not adapt to new rules/change in management.” In this situation, the internal cause would be the inability to adapt to new rules. The external cause would be the buyout, which would be related to the workplace environment. Another participant responded “not meeting time expectations and disagreement with management” where the internal cause would be related to the failure to meet time expectations at the job and the misunderstanding with superiors, and the external cause would encompass management’s attitude or expectations at the job, related to work environment.

Finally, the remaining 11% provided responses that we were *unable to code*. This category mainly included responses such as “NA” or “I don’t know.”

Discussion

Our findings suggested that autistic individuals experienced employer-initiated terminations for diverse reasons. The most common reasons identified related to work performance, social difficulties, attendance, and mental health. The relatively high frequency of these reasons in the present sample is consistent with other studies – primarily from the perspective of employers – that have examined reasons for job loss among adults with serious mental illness or ID (Becker et al., 1998; Lagomarcino, 1990; West et al., 2015). Furthermore, many of the reasons for being terminated appeared to be situational, potentially reflecting

a poor fit of the job to the individual's skills and abilities, instead of reflecting pervasive individual challenges or lack of preparation. That is, it was rare for adults to explicitly cite pre-existing reasons such as insufficient training, health challenges, or even their autism. It was also rare for adults to discuss reasons that reflected declines in performance over time; it appeared from their responses that many of the challenges were likely present early on in their employment tenure at that workplace.

A somewhat different picture emerged when examining *attributions* for being terminated from a job. Though, as mentioned above, many of the reasons for employer-initiated terminations seemed somewhat specific to the employment situation, it was far more common for autistic adults to attribute the terminations to internal rather than external reasons. Certainly, as our study and others suggest, there are reasons for employer-initiated termination that might be internal to the individual such as mental health symptoms that interfere with performing job tasks, social impairments that lead to difficulties in employer-employee interactions, or executive functioning challenges that can make it difficult to prioritize tasks. However, there are also many workplace-related factors (external to the individual) that can make keeping a job challenging. These types of external reasons for terminations were discussed less often by participants in this study, which might reflect their taking ownership of problems that are not necessarily of their own making, or a tendency to feel responsible for terminations happening in their careers. To better understand circumstances around terminations, future research may want to compare self-perceptions of employer-initiated terminations to employer perceptions or administrative records.

Being terminated from a job can impact an individual's finances, independence, mental and physical health, as well as their social life. It could also impact the services to which they have access. For example, in earlier analyses from our larger project (Zheng et al., 2021), we found that one of the reasons why autistic adults were not receiving services to treat depressive symptoms was because they had lost their health insurance due to a job loss. The autism population is at higher risk for co-occurring mental health symptoms such as depression and anxiety (Gotham et al., 2020; Nimmo-Smith et al., 2020; Pezzimenti et al., 2019) that could be exacerbated by a job termination – either due to lack of access to treatment or to the additional stressors that terminations could bring to the lives of these individuals and their families. In the general population, negative events such as a job loss predict higher rates of depression, anxiety, stress and loneliness (Andreeva et al., 2015; Eckhard, 2020; Eersel et al., 2020; Hortulanus et al., 2006; Libby et al., 2010; Stolove et al., 2017). Longitudinal studies in autism samples also show negative mental health impacts of job loss

(Goldfarb et al., 2022; Taylor et al., 2022), but no studies to our knowledge have examined the impacts of employer-initiated terminations in this group. Given the high rates of internal attributions in this sample, and the strong associations of internal attributions (vs. external) with self-esteem and self-worth (Wiener, 1985), it may be that employer-initiated terminations play a particularly powerful role in influencing psychological health among autistic adults. Longitudinal research is needed to investigate the range of potential impacts of job terminations for autistic adults, including mental health, social relationships, and financial independence.

These findings have important implications for the development of interventions to prevent employer-initiated terminations among autistic adults and ultimately, improve their employment outcomes. Many of the challenges mentioned by the adults in this study could be addressed through effective accommodations and supports (Khalifa et al., 2020; Schall, 2010; Seagraves, 2021). Difficulties arriving to work on time, for example, could be addressed through enabling technology applications (e.g., alarms, Amazon's Alexa reminders) or a supportive person to assist with time management. Challenges keeping up with the workload could be addressed through conversation with a supervisor to adjust tasks and expectations to better meet the skills and abilities of the autistic individual, or by identifying a colleague who could act as a "peer mentor" and assist the autistic adult with reminders, daily checks on tasks, and ad-hoc training. Even challenges identified by the autistic adult to be due to "bad behavior" could possibly be addressed through clear and explicit discussion around expectations in the workplace. These types of accommodations and supports could be implemented in general workplaces settings, but in some cases, adults may need more intensive support. In these circumstances, job coaching and customized employment may be a helpful option, as they have been shown to be effective for autistic individuals (Capo, 2001; Chen et al., 2015; García-Villamizar & Hughes, 2007; Walsh et al., 2014; Wehman et al., 2016), and may help to facilitate job success.

One significant barrier to receiving effective workplace supports for autistic adults is knowledge and awareness of neurodiversity among employers (Solomon, 2020). In this study, even though adults often cited internal attributions for their termination, many of their responses indicated that employers and workplaces may not have been as supportive as they could have been. It can be difficult for employers to know which accommodations are going to be most helpful to support mental health, wellbeing, and work performance of their autistic employees, as the appropriate accommodations are often less obvious than for physical disabilities (Gould-Werth et al., 2018). Furthermore, in some cases, employers might not be aware that the employee has autism,

as disclosure is a personal choice. Even if an autistic adult decides to disclose their diagnosis and effectively communicates what supports or accommodations will be helpful, employers may not be able or interested in providing them (Gould-Werth et al., 2018; Kaye et al., 2011). Better workplace education about neurodiversity and how to effectively support autistic adults may help employers and coworkers better react to challenging workplace situations – both those that the autistic adult might perceive as “externally-caused” and “internally-caused” – reducing the risk for employer-initiated terminations in this group.

Finally, our findings suggest that supporting autistic adults to effectively advocate for themselves in the workplace may also play an important role in reducing the risk of employer-initiated terminations. Advocacy training or support could serve to empower autistic employees to evaluate the risks and benefits of disclosing their autism diagnosis in their specific employment situation (Lindsay et al., 2021), to speak up when their needs at the job are not being met, to address potential self-blame when challenges arise at the workplace, and to teach a proactive approach to dissipate problems at work (or at least help adults with autism to voice their concerns before the situation escalates to a termination). While some employees may succeed at a job with small accommodations (such as being allowed to listen to music while on the job or wearing noise cancelling headphones), others will need a combination of accommodations (such as team support, multiple check-ins, additional training and even transportation to and from work). Open conversations with employers to reach an understanding regarding supports and accommodations may be key in fostering a positive experience for all parties and avoiding employer-initiated terminations.

In sum, interpreting our findings in the context of extant literature suggests that preparing autistic adults to effectively advocate for their needs in the workplace, as well as assisting employers in providing effective accommodations and training, and making use of existing employment models that are beneficial for autistic adults (e.g., supported or customized employment) could prevent problematic situations from arising and reduce the risk for employer-initiated terminations. Our findings also suggest that, to head off difficult situations (or address them before they worsen), these workplace conversations, accommodations, and supports should happen early on in the job placement.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations worth noting. First, our sample was relatively homogenous in terms of race, ethnicity, support needs, and age. The reasons for termination reflect those of the study participants and are likely not

generalizable to the population of autistic adults. Adults in the general population who are from racial or ethnic minoritized groups are more likely than white adults to experience employer-initiated terminations (Couch & Fairlie, 2010; Gittleman, 2019), and it may be that reasons for terminations are different among autistic adults from racial or ethnic minoritized groups. It is also likely that the reasons for terminations will be different among autistic adults with an ID or who have greater support needs, or among those who are in middle or later adulthood. Future research should be intentional about including more diverse samples to understand the rates and circumstances around employer-initiated terminations for autistic adults with greater support needs, from racial or ethnic minoritized groups, from gender diverse groups, or beyond early adulthood.

Our study included participants living in the US before COVID-19 social distancing measures started. As such, the reasons identified for terminations may be limited to the job market in the US, and how labor policy and companies protect (or not) employees with autism in the workplace, as well as hiring managers’ attitudes towards hiring or training someone with autism or with a disability (Bonaccio et al., 2020). Experiences of employer-initiated terminations among autistic adults likely vary by country and geographical area. Second, it is important to note that data were collected right before COVID-19 restrictions took place in the US, and before the “Great Resignation” trend spiked, a period in which many employees voluntarily left their jobs and a timespan that may have changed the employment landscape that existed before COVID-19. The pandemic gave some workers the opportunity to rethink their careers, long-term goals, and work conditions. Many workers expressed their desire for flexibility, remote work, and personal fulfillment during their work hours. As a result, many companies are adapting quickly to changes and more fully considering their workers’ desires and needs. Experiences of employer-initiated terminations may be different now than it was prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finally, our indicators of employer-initiated terminations consisted of two variables (one binary and one open-ended). We did not collect information about job types, positions, how many times an individual experienced employer-initiated terminations, if the adult had disclosed their autism diagnosis to their employer, what supports/accommodations they were receiving on the job, or the impact of the termination (e.g., psychological, financial). These are all variables that would be valuable to include in future studies to better understand how to best support autistic adults in maintaining employment.

Future studies should also examine individual and employer-level predictors of employer-initiated terminations, as well as consequences for mental health,

behavioural functioning, and future employment prospects. What aspects of or changes to the workplace might increase or decrease the risk of employer-initiated terminations? Are autistic adults who experience mental health challenges more likely to experience an employer-initiated termination? Or does being terminated lead to mental health challenges? We were not able to investigate these questions in our cross-sectional design; longitudinal studies are essential to address these important questions and should be utilized in future research on this topic.

Conclusion

Autistic adults experience employer-initiated terminations at higher rates than neurotypical peers and adults with disabilities. Exploring how autistic individuals perceive and make sense of these terminations may help us better understand how to provide supportive workplace environments. Though extant research suggests that many workplaces are not accommodating to autistic adults, the majority of adults in this study cited internal attributions for their termination. There may be a tendency for adults with autism to blame themselves for job failures even in situations when they are not primarily at fault. At the same time, lack of supports or accommodations, or lack of understanding from employers, may be contributing factors that lead to terminations in the autism population. Suggestions for future research include investigating the range of factors (including employer-level and individual factors) that can reduce terminations and promote successful outcomes in the workplace.

Funding Information This research was supported by the FAR Fund.

Declarations

Competing Interest Disclosure The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

Ethics Approval The study protocol, informed consent and procedures were approved by institutional review boards at the authors' institutions.

Consent for Publication All participants provided written electronic informed consent before taking part in the study.

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