“Know thy work and do it”:
The Rhetorical-Pedagogical Work of Employment and Workplace Guides for Adults with “High-Functioning” Autism

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Disability and childhood have an enduring and deeply entangled relationship. Across cultures, appeals to pity are made via images of disabled children and disabled individuals relegated to “eternal” childhoods—both in depictions of disability and in the material world of citizenship rights. Yet, as psychologists Jennifer Stevenson, Bev Harp, and Morton Ann Gernsbacher elaborate in their Disability Studies Quarterly article “Infantilizing Autism,” few disabilities have been so persistently associated with the figure of the child, so persistently and falsely portrayed as a disability of childhood as autism—a portrayal which they conclude “poses a formidable barrier to the dignity and well-being of autistic people of all ages.” However, it would seem that barrier is being penetrated at long last. According to career coach Barbara Bissonnette, whose writings figure prominently in my forthcoming discussion, there is now a fast-growing “genuine concern among families, professionals, and government agencies about the waves of young people on the autism spectrum” entering adulthood (Complete 188). “In some ways, it seems that neurotypicals have suddenly realized that children grow up, and they don’t outgrow autism,” Bissonnette observes (Asperger’s 188)—the belatedness of this collective revelation attesting again to the pervasiveness and power of autism’s infantilization.

In response to this cultural awakening, scholars in rhetoric, writing, and Eng-

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lish studies have begun to ask (and answer) questions—often within the pages of this journal—about what it will mean to have these waves of young adults enter our classrooms (for example, Jurecic, “Neurodiversity” and “Mindblindness”; Heilker; Heilker and Yergeau; Lewiecki-Wilson and Dolmage; Price). Beyond academe, we can witness a related rising attentiveness to questions of what happens when waves of young adults on the spectrum enter, or seek to enter, the workforce, one manifestation of which has been a veritable explosion of guidebooks designed to help adults with high-functioning autism (HFA) or Asperger’s syndrome (AS) find and maintain employment or “survive” and even thrive in the neurotypical workplace. Variously authored by neurotypical career coaches such as Bissonnette (who specializes in coaching adults with AS), by professionals with AS or autism (including Temple Grandin), or by those intimately involved with individuals on the spectrum, these books have a number of rhetorical-pedagogical aims in relation to different audiences. Primarily, of course, they address individuals with HFA in order to deliver the types of career advice and support just mentioned. Secondarily, the books are written for and often directly address families, teachers, advocates, and, most significant for my purposes, prospective employers of those with HFA, with the professed goal of increasing understanding of the condition.

Yet just as overtly, as I will demonstrate, these guidebooks strive to convince the secondary audience of prospective employers of the market value of HFA and actually serve to market individuals who have it. In those three processes (advising, facilitating understanding, and marketing), the books accomplish more notable rhetorical-cultural and pedagogical work still: they reflect and reinvent US cultural desires and fantasies about twenty-first-century workers, constituting—and often endeavoring to actively (and rhetorically) train—the ideal worker subject. In this essay, I will review and discuss a representative selection of employment and workplace guides for adults with HFA with an eye to these underlying, ideological rhetorical motives and effects. Though I do not deny the practical value of the guidebooks, I seek to ask what rhetorical-discursive and pedagogical work they might do, and what rhetorical-discursive and pedagogical consequences they might have, beyond aiding certain individuals in job searching, career development, or workplace “survival.”

Scholars and teachers in rhetoric and English studies should be interested in such questions, and in these particular texts, for three principal reasons. First, inquiries into the rhetorical and pedagogical functions of the employment guides for autistic adults contribute to the vital scholarly work occurring at the intersections of rhetoric and disability studies, intersections that many have pointed out are necessary and even inevitable given the fields’ shared understanding of the role language plays in constructing and normalizing identities (see Duffy and Yergeau). Second, whether we accept or decry the mounting pressure placed on English studies (and all of the liberal arts) to prove our greater relevance to, and take greater responsibility prepar-
ing students for, the twenty-first-century workforce, the fact remains that we are charged with this task by a variety of stakeholders, including students themselves.

And yet, as Shannon Walters notes in “Autistic Ethos at Work,” few to none of us have moved beyond the types of classroom-based inquiries cited earlier to study the transition of autistic students or others with disabilities to the workplace (n. 6), or, just as valuable in my view, representations of that workplace. Rhetorical-discursive analysis of the guidebooks in my study can help us discern how the twenty-first-century workplace and workforce are being portrayed to students and prospective workers with autism and, considering the number of secondary audiences these books address, within the broader culture. Finally, teacher-scholars in rhetoric and English studies should be interested in the employment and workplace guides for autistic adults because, as I have already suggested and will elucidate at length later in this essay, they are themselves intensively pedagogical, with some of them even offering what we will easily recognize as explicit, if not theoretically informed or reflexive, instruction in rhetoric.

Before turning to the texts’ pedagogical properties, though, I concentrate on the valued properties of workers constituted and circulated by the employment and workplace guides, demonstrating how the guidebooks reinvent the autistic worker as an ideal employee for such qualities as focus, loyalty, and experiencing work as vocation. However, as I then go on to illustrate, because the guidebooks adhere to the common diagnostic (and widespread cultural) definition of autism as comprising deficits, or at least potentially detrimental (to workplace functionality) differences, in communication and social interaction, as well as tendencies toward inflexibility, the texts also serve the pedagogical purpose of norming the autistic worker subject so he or she can be closer to the neurotypical ideal. This norming, in turn, is achieved in large part through forms of rhetorical training. Before I undertake any of this exposition and argument, however, I must more thoroughly introduce and contextualize the guidebooks themselves.

**Introducing the Workplace and Employment Guides for Adults with AS/HFA**

Though Bissonnette recalls that when she started coaching clients with AS in 2006, there were few resources available that addressed adults, much less employment (Complete 188), the earliest employment guidebooks for adults on the autism spectrum actually began to appear over a decade ago. When I began my research on the guides in 2013, I resolved to go back only five years for my sample selection in order to (1) contain the sample, given the aforementioned explosion of this subgenre; (2) ensure it reflected both the most current workplace values and current (if hardly uncontested) medicoscientific theories about autism spectrum disorder (ASD); (3)
ensure the inclusion of Temple Grandin and Kate Duffy’s influential second edition of *Developing Talents*, published in 2008, in addition to Grandin’s 2012 collection, *Different . . . Not Less: Inspiring Stories of Achievement and Successful Employment from Adults with Autism, Asperger’s, and ADHD* (which, as its subtitle suggests, is more a compilation of personal narratives than an advice manual).

With the exception of Grandin and Duffy’s 2008 book, then, I selected texts published no earlier than 2010 and that consistently appeared within the top-ten books, sorted by relevance, searching either “Asperger’s” or “autism” and “work” or “employment” on Amazon. That is, I selected texts that a large swath of the general public would be most likely to encounter and purchase during a browsing session. I also selected for authors who, like Grandin, have published widely either in the career advice genre or on other issues affecting adults with ASD (or both). At the time of this writing, Bissonnette has published two career advice books, both included in my study: *The Complete Guide to Getting a Job for People with Asperger’s Syndrome* and *Asperger’s Syndrome Workplace Survival Guide* (hereafter referred to as *Workplace Survival Guide*). She has a third forthcoming, which will be focused on sharing her coaching strategies with other coaches and parents (“About Barbara”). Another author in the sample, Ashley Stanford, who was motivated to write career advice for people with AS in part by her husband, who has AS, and his career struggles and successes, has written a book of relationship advice in addition to her book of career advice studied here, *Business for Aspies*. And Rudy Simone, too, who identifies as having AS, author of *Asperger’s on the Job*, has written two books of relationship advice and has written extensively about and for women on the spectrum. During the last months of drafting this essay, Simone’s *Asperger’s on the Job*, Bissonnette’s second book, the *Workplace Survival Guide*, and Grandin’s *Different . . . Not Less* have consistently been the highest selling of books in the sample according to Amazon’s sales rankings, with all three having cracked the top 100 of books about autism and AS more generally, while Bissonnette’s and Grandin’s also ascended to the top 100 selling books within the category of disability and parenting.

Finally, beyond sales rankings, it is worth observing that even a cursory review of editorial and customer reviews on Amazon shows that the guidebooks are reaching readers across all of their intended audiences. All books have been reviewed (usually favorably) on Amazon and widely elsewhere by people who identify as having AS or autism as well as by educators, employers, and advocates. Yet, as the titles of the guidebooks alone will indicate to some, from a disability rights perspective, the books proceed from a host of problematic premises and thus do not bear endorsements from, say, ASAN (Autistic Self Advocacy Network) or other disability rights–affiliated organizations or individuals. A disability rights perspective, for instance, tends to prefer and promote “identity-first language”—that is, “ASD individual” or, better, “autistic person” (Brown)—rather than the guidebook titles’ consistent use of “indi-
individuals” or “people with Asperger’s or high-functioning autism.” (As I’ve begun to do in this essay, I will often use the “people with” language of the guidebooks when referring to them, but will otherwise employ identity-first language.)

Moreover, a disability rights view would decry the very notion of “high functioning,” which appears only in Simone’s and Grandin’s titles but is implicit even when “Asperger’s” is used instead. As Stuart Murray summarizes in “Autism Functions/The Function of Autism,” “high-functioning” serves to construct the “use value of the condition,” ranking autistic people so that their very “humanity is defined by a quota” (for example, “how autistic?”), and also dangerously simplifies “the ways in which autistic presence and intelligence actually manifest themselves.” Again, this hierarchizing role of high functioning is not alleviated by the designator Asperger’s syndrome, which appears in every guidebook title. To the contrary, as Murray clarifies, it was “the increasing acceptance and publicizing of the existence of Asperger syndrome during the 1990s, and its projected difference from ideas of ‘classic’ autism,” that helped make the idea of “functioning” so “central to contemporary discussions of autism.” In sum, the titles alone make clear that these are all mainstream books—which is both their danger and power—with an assimilationist or, as I noted in the introduction, “normative” agenda, despite what we will see now is their often celebratory stance toward “autistic traits” as they constitute (and market) the ideal employee.

“A focused, undeviating, project-driven employee”

As stated in my introduction, the employment and workplace guides are unabashed in their efforts to establish the market value of HFA and to market workers with HFA to prospective employers. Lamenting the high percentage of AS/HFA adults who are un- or underemployed, psychologist Tony Attwood writes in the foreword to Grandin’s Developing Talents, “This is a remarkable waste of potential talent. The American workforce needs the benefit of the qualities of people with Asperger Syndrome and autism” (i). In her Workplace Survival Guide, Bissonnette also insists that, with their “eye for detail,” “Aspergians” fill “distinct needs” within today’s workforce, specifically those not filled by “multi-tasking generalist,” “big-picture”-thinking neurotypicals (143), and are also particularly “loyal workers” (188). Finally, and most overtly, Simone opens Asperger’s on the Job with a chapter addressed directly to employers, titled “Why Should You Employ Someone with AS?” In answer, she provides a nine-point list of “advantages of Asperger’s Syndrome in the workplace,” the top of which includes “focus and diligence,” taking special pride in work, and “independent, unique thinking” (1–2).

Regarding the last of these qualities, individuals with AS/HFA are occasionally marketed to prospective employers for what is presented as an innate tendency to
“think outside the box,” or “march to their own drum,” to use the cliché Simone actually employs, a quality celebrated for its likelihood to lead to “novel and creative ideas” (Simone 2). Grandin, for instance, marshals long lists of “[s]ome of our world’s finest minds,” “famous people who were probably on the autism spectrum,” and credits “autistic traits” for their cultural contributions (Developing xi–xiii). In *Business for Aspies*, Stanford, too, appeals to a history of “famous people [we] remember” who were probably “quite imbalanced in their lives” (174) and appropriates the rhetoric used to convey the market value of other disorders, notably mania/bipolar disorder, that mental “imbalance” correlates with productivity (see Martin). “Some careers require sickness,” or “a bit” of mental disability, Stanford declares (173), because they demand “passions so intense and so focused” that workers can ignore even physical needs (175, 173). Yet this romantic “mad genius” narrative, with its attendant rhetoric of imbalance-as-resource, is by no means the most prevalent narrative propagated by the guidebooks, nor the most prevalent construction of the ideal employee with autism. While focus remains a central, celebrated quality of what Walters calls “autistic ethos at work,” the focus the guidebooks market to prospective employers is of a more temperate nature and is better described as diligence. Indeed, the ideal employee with autism is regularly constituted as a docile, determinedly task-oriented team player despite—or, as we will see, because of—“autistic traits” such as asociality and inflexibility.

Walters, who is one of the few rhetoric scholars to have written about autism and work, has examined the rise of international technology companies that recruit people with HFA/AS and found that these companies often recruit (and market) such individuals for stereotyped skill sets “such as focus [and] high tolerance for repetitive tasks.” But just as the diligent focus we will see celebrated (and marketed) in the guidebooks reflects something other than “mad” passion, so does it reflect something other than “the assumption that people with autism ‘thrive on predictable, monotonous work’” (Walters). As indicated, the assumption reflected instead is that people with HFA/AS make ideal employees precisely because they do not thrive on interpersonal relationships or daily sociality. Simone, for example, writes of individuals with AS that “sometimes their social weaknesses are career strengths. They don’t like to chitchat on the job, so that means they will have more time for work” (93). Similarly, Stanford claims, “There are many traits such as ‘failure to develop peer relationships’ that, according to diagnostic criteria, are impairments, yet, in the workplace […] can […] make you a focused, undeviating, project-driven employee; that is, the most valuable employee on the team” (11).

Given that, diagnostically and culturally-symbolically, autism is what philosopher Ian Hacking terms “the pathology of absence of social interaction” (639), what we see in these last two guidebook quotations are persuasive rescriptings of autism’s most sedimented, denigrated trait—the trait that supposedly makes the inherently
group-oriented workplace such a challenge for autistic employees to negotiate—into a marketable quality of supreme focus that benefits the group. Interestingly, Stanford takes on and revises a renowned, also widely pathologized, subtrait of autistic “absence of social interaction”—“absence of eye contact” (Hacking 639)—maintaining that “avoid[ing] eye contact from time to time” can be “a brilliant tactic for the workplace” (Stanford 54). “Why?” she asks, apparently anticipating rejoinders: “Because in nearly every workplace [. . .] [t]he best way to gain [the boss’s respect] is by being and appearing to be an efficient, focused worker who is more dedicated to the task at hand than to chatting with people” (54).

And finally, in another revision of a related, pathologized autistic trait, both Simone and Stanford endeavor to persuade audiences that “mindblindness,” the purported inability of autistic people to perceive the cognitive or affective states of others, leads to a privileging of “logic over emotion” (Simone 4) that further contributes to focus and productivity. Observing that “emotional games do nothing except slow down the progress of business,” Stanford asserts that “[b]eing free of” such illogical, emotion-driven behavior can be one of your greatest assets at work. It allows you to focus in a way that others cannot. Your mindblindness [. . .] may actually fine-tune your brain for greater achievements” (116). In sum, as Simone writes, “[a] person with Asperger’s will go to work—to work. They are not there to win a popularity contest” (12). And, as I go on to show now, when they get to work, they will stay there, garnering and providing a competitive edge not only through asocial, logic-driven, emotion-blunting focus and diligence, but via unsurpassed loyalty and a singular, consuming dedication to career.

**Vocation, Vocation, Vocation—and the Function of Temple Grandin**

_The latest Gospel in this world is, Know thy work and do it. “Know thyself”: long enough has that poor “self” of thine tormented thee [. . .] Know what thou canst work at; and work at it, like a Hercules!_

—Thomas Carlyle

A capitalist slogan tells us that “time is money,” and it would seem that employees with AS/HFA have more of the former to give to and thus more of the latter to make for employers. Like Simone, Stanford writes, “People who have a low desire to spend time with friends [. . .] generally have more available hours in the week,” an “Aspie neurology,” as she puts it, which “allows you to enter careers [. . .] that require 60, 70, 80, or sometimes more hours a week” (120). Further, those with AS/HFA apparently may be indifferent to remuneration for their 80-hour work weeks. In a chapter titled “Trust Me, I have Asperger’s,” Simone quotes an interview subject as saying,
“I often spend a great deal of time to get things perfect, and the extra time is often uncompensated. I just love it” (54). “Internal motivation is what will drive a person with AS,” Simone explains, “the feeling of a job well done, more than prestige or promise of reward. Some have done jobs beneath their level of skill or for very low pay because it simply felt good to do the work” (51; emphasis original). And lastly, not only will those with AS/HFA be “internally motivated” to commit the most (potentially uncompensated) daily or weekly time to their careers and employers, they will be internally motivated by a preference for routine and structure, or the “inflexibility’ trait,” to commit to an employer for life (Stanford 149). In a chapter on “flexibility and routine,” Stanford avers, “What an employer wants most of all is an employee who can be hired, trained, do a good job, and stay” (148). She says next that “[t]he most stable people I know are people with autism” and proceeds to tell the story of Ned, a “researcher at a local university” (148). Ned “will never move from his job unless forced to do so,” Stanford insists (149). “He will still be a researcher at this university until the day he retires.” Ned is thus “every boss’s dream employee since he does a superb job [and] [. . . .] will never be distracted by other job opportunities; his devotion and loyalty will never be split” (149).

Recall that a main argument I am developing in the first portion of this essay is that the employment and workplace guides for adults with HFA recirculate and reinvent cultural desires or fantasies about contemporary workers, and clearly, we are in presence of many of these: dedicated, focused, lifelong employees who will work endless hours without social or emotional distractions off the clock or for low pay are a prototype of capitalist wish fulfillment. And Simone, for one, does admit there are “downsides” to such extraordinary levels of dedication. With so much time and self committed to work, Simone cautions that “if the work isn’t meaningful, enthusiasm will wane.” In fact, she warns, “If our passion is not our vocation, we who have Asperger’s may neglect actually making money” (2).

This sentiment, that it is essential for individuals with AS/HFA to find ways to channel passions, preoccupations, or fixations into a career choice so that they can experience work as vocation—as life’s singular purpose—is pervasive in the employment guides and is propagated most notably and forcefully by Grandin and Duffy. In the introduction to Developing Talents, Grandin writes, “Work is more than just a livelihood or paycheck; it is the key to a satisfying and productive life. [. . .] Certainly my life would not be worth living if I did not have intellectually satisfying work” (xiii). Grandin reiterates this fundamental claim about the import of work at various points throughout the book, describing work as the “framework” or “bedrock” of her life and saying that the “[working] world has been [her] savior” (xiv, 51, 149). Her hope for the strategies offered in Developing Talents, and also for the “inspiring stories of achievement” compiled for Different . . . Not Less, is that they will help others on the spectrum to be similarly rescued from “small and unsatisfying” lives devoid of paid, pleasurable employment (Developing xi; Different 5).
And, it is interesting to note—from a disability rights perspective it is disconcerting to note—that one key to joining the working world for Grandin is rejecting a disability identity in favor of an intellectual identity early in life. In the epilogue to *Different . . . Not Less*, Grandin expresses concern “that many young autistic people are getting fixated on autism itself, instead of fixating on some useful outside interest, such as art, computer programming, or history.” “It troubles me,” she continues, “when a 9-year old walks up to me and all he or she wants to talk to me about is his or her autism. I much more enjoy hearing about his or her history projects or robotics project” (386–87). Grandin affirms here in the epilogue what she has said often elsewhere, that she would never choose to “be cured of autism,” but she states unequivocally that although “[a]utism is a significant part of who I am, [. . .] I consider myself a designer, college professor, and scientist first” (387). In short, Grandin’s message, asserted directly in the introduction to *Different . . . Not Less*, is “I [. . .] feel that my career is my life. I am what I do” (5).

As the world’s most famous autistic person—famous in large part for “capitalizing on the very qualities associated with autism spectrum disorders” to achieve her career success (Attwood i)—Grandin has tremendous cultural and professional ethos, which is why I focus on her career advice disproportionately in this section on work as vocation. Indeed, Walters credits Grandin for “redefine[ing] what it means to be an ‘ideal’ professional with autism”; for imagining and enabling society “to imagine a wider range of jobs for people with autism” than the stereotypical ones recruited for by the companies of her study. Even if we agree with Walters’s assessment, however, Grandin’s important contribution in this respect does not exempt her from revivifying other conventional and, again, disconcerting views about work, nor should we expect it to. As Dustin Galer observes in “Disabled Capitalists,” “Many people with disabilities share in the mainstream ethos that participation in the competitive workforce is a primary feature of their identity” and may develop an especial investment in this ethos in order to “distance themselves” from the idea that “disability constitutes a burden to others.” Yet, as Galer also writes, the “associative relationship between paid work and identity is particularly problematic for people with disabilities,” who are so often “excluded from the world of competitive employment.”

The associative relationship and larger ideology circulated by Grandin’s rhetoric—that work marks one’s place in the world and is the road to satisfaction—is problematic from broader perspectives as well. As Zygmunt Bauman makes clear in *Work, Consumerism, and the New Poor*, “Work that is rich in gratifying experience, work as self-fulfillment, work as the meaning of life, work as the core [. . .] of everything that counts, [. . .] in short, work as vocation, has become the privilege of the few” (35; emphasis original). The vast majority of people, regardless of ability, will not find full realization of life’s purpose through work. The opportunity to live through work, if this is even desirable, is what Bauman terms “a distinctive mark of the elite” (35).
In addition to achieving great fulfillment through career, Grandin has clearly achieved superior levels of what Catherine Prendergast has termed “rhetoricability”: that is, Grandin is “considered a rhetorically enabled subject” who has gained (or been “granted”) full admittance “into the world of rhetoric” (56; see also Johnson). Yet, if this is true—in order for it to be true—we must do something entirely more, and entirely less, than marvel at her as a paragon of overcoming or exceptionalism. We must respond to Grandin as we would to any rhetor who has attained her degree of cultural notoriety and influence—with honed attentiveness and, yes, a modicum of suspicion. Grandin may revise autistic ethos in positive ways, but she does so to some troubling ends, not least of which is the reinscription of the mainstream capitalist, and classist, ethos or ideology that we are all, and only, “what we do.”

Grandin’s career advice books, I am arguing, often recirculate elitist work-advocation rhetoric, as well as deleterious and misleading narratives of “overcoming” (or transcending) disability that are themselves deeply implicated in overly optimistic narratives of American individualism and personal responsibility (see Linton 17–19)—the last line of Developing Talents is actually “the only person who stands in the way of your achieving something is you” (171). Nevertheless, Grandin is not wholly unaware of ideological mechanisms and effects, nor is she a pure idealist. There are times when she provides readers (especially those in her primary audience) with difficult doses of realism. Attention to one such moment can help us transition to the pedagogical properties of Grandin’s writing and then to those of the guidebooks more generally.

In a Developing Talents chapter devoted to entrepreneurship, Grandin forewarns that although entrepreneurs are currently “the darlings of governments, media, and higher education” (another outgrowth of American individualism), and although self-employment may seem a perfect fit for people on the spectrum, the “reality of owning a business” is both a “less romantic” and less individualistic undertaking than she thinks her readers might presume (150). Grandin still recommends that readers consider self-employment, but with this sternly worded caveat in place:

Look at your talents and think about how you could use them to solve a problem, fill a need or jump on an opportunity you see in the world around you. Notice, I said “the world around you.” I didn’t start my business because I wanted to spend my days drawing; I saw a need in the livestock industry that hadn’t been met [. . . .] The world has to want your product or service in order for you to be successful in business. (149)

Grandin’s tone itself is of interest here; clearly, this passage is “the writing of the teacher” (Murray, Representing 38)—pedagogic, at least, if not didactic. In Representing Autism, Murray notes that slipping into the “instructional” mode is a “common tendency in [Grandin’s] writing,” even when she is not writing in instructional genres, and he attributes this tendency to what he acknowledges is a “contentious” claim about
Grandin’s overarching cultural–authorial function: a “primary function of [Grandin’s] prose” across her writings, Murray maintains, is to convey an “account [. . .] of the happy and viable autistic subject who, through difficulty, has learned to adapt and contribute to the world at large” (38–39). Murray’s contentious claim is one we must contend with as we keep in mind, and attempt to negotiate among, Grandin’s cultural power and agency as a rhetor and (yet) the agency dominant discourses have in, and over, her rhetoric—whether those are dominant discourses of work as vocation or of triumphant overcomings of various sorts. Murray’s argument is also interesting, though, when we reflect on the actual content of Grandin’s quoted passage. In no uncertain terms, Grandin instructs readers (especially those in her primary audience) to do exactly as Murray says she has done and for which she has come to serve the cultural-pedagogic role of model autist: adapt and join the world.

Though my focus has been on Grandin to this point, I need to show before moving on that she is hardly alone among the career advice authors in mandating that readers join the world, especially when discussing self-employment. Echoing Grandin in tone and content, Bissonnette writes, “Self-employment is not for everyone. If your motive for starting a business is to avoid going on job interviews, not have a boss, or not to have to interact with others, think again. You will have to convince others to hire you, keep them happy, and communicate effectively with them” (Complete 33). Simone articulates slightly different concerns (and in a different tone) around self-employment, such as its potential to lead to “financial struggle” and failure to “[address] the inherent need to connect” (110), but in the latter it is clear that the join-the-world proviso endures. The guidebook authors’ imperative to connect, join the world, interact, and communicate effectively has intriguing implications given that the autistic personality has been defined by egocentricity and non- or idiosyncratic communicativeness (see Heilker and Yergeau 494), and given that all authors believe that social interaction poses real workplace challenges for individuals on the spectrum. As I illustrate in the next section, this social imperative thus necessitates orienting autistic employees to a neurotypical ideal, which, in turn, involves their learning a rhetorical orientation to workplace culture.

**Teaching “the elusive concept of ‘fitting in’”: Rhetoric to the Rescue**

Perhaps unsurprisingly, neurotypical career coach Bissonnette is most determined of authors in my sample to bring employees with HFA into alignment with neurotypicality, an objective she makes clear in the *Workplace Survival Guide*’s subtitle, “A Neurotypical’s Secrets for Success,” but makes clearer still in the book’s first chapter, writing, “My perspective as a neurotypical business person will help you navigate the workplace and ‘fit in.’” She explains, “This means being able to interact with
co-workers in a way that makes them feel comfortable working with you,” or, one page later, “in ways that enable others to work effectively with you” (16–17; emphases added). Bissonnette confesses that “[s]ometimes [she is] asked why […] Aspergians have to do all the changing” (16). Her answer, essentially, is that, although recognition of neurodiversity is increasing, it’s still a neurotypical world and workplace and, in that world and workplace, no one is exempt from pressures to conform: “Remember,” she writes, in what Murray might call the voice of the teacher but we could also hear as the lecturing voice of a parent, “everyone has to fit into cultural expectations and norms” (16–17; emphasis original).

Still, though Bissonnette is the most forthright in declaring that a goal of her career advice books is to help employees with AS understand, and then master, “the elusive concept of ‘fitting in’” (Asperger’s 17), all guidebook authors, with the exception perhaps of Stanford, whose book is almost purely celebratory of AS traits, adhere to a common policy captured best by a quote from Grandin: that to be successful in, or just to be in, the neurotypical workplace—“out among others,” as Grandin puts it—“you have to fit in as much as possible” (Developing 29). To facilitate fitting in, across all books (even Stanford’s) there is an extraordinary emphasis on personal hygiene and grooming, and on some variation of learning to “do work that is assigned by other people” (Grandin, Different 11; emphasis original). Beyond the direction to take directions (and stay clean), there is also a shared, strong, if almost entirely implicit emphasis within the workplace guides on learning to think and act rhetorically. It would seem that training in rhetoric—not explicitly theorized but undeniably deployed—plays a central role in norming autistic employees and, more significantly, in attempting to ensure that they can norm themselves.

The implicit, nearly accidental, or at least not fully conscious nature of much of the instruction in rhetoric proffered by the guidebooks is of the utmost importance to my coming arguments and ultimate conclusions, so I need to further expose and foreground that implicitness here. First, no guidebook author uses the term rhetoric, though, as we see in what follows, many use rhetorical terms. What’s more, despite the fact that all guidebook authors understand workplace communication and social interaction to pose among the most significant workplace challenges for autistic employees—due to deficits in verbal and nonverbal communication and in perceiving others’ cognitive or affective states (that is, mindblindness), only one of the authors, Bissonnette, in the Workplace Survival Guide, has a chapter expressly devoted to communication, which she titles “A Primer on Communication at Work” (though Stanford has a chapter on eye contact and reading faces). The rest of the guidebooks contain a smattering of what rhetoricians will recognize as rhetorical instruction—put to the ends of training normative subjects—in the form of scattered appeals to imitation, delivery, invention, and, especially, to audience and context.
“Know thy work and do it”

“Know your audience,” Grandin counsels in her epilogue to Different . . . Not Less. “The material has to be appropriate for the customer” (382). Though this is a rare instance of Grandin using rhetorical terminology expressly, the mandate to know your audience encapsulates her principal view from the entrepreneurship chapter in Developing Talents (a rhetorical view if there ever was one) that workers, especially those inventing products or services, must anticipate and respond to a need in the world; they must ascertain and respond to what rhetoricians might call “an imperfection marked by urgency,” or exigence (Bitzer 6). Further, Grandin is a strong promoter of the value of imitation—that-long neglected, now disparaged, but formerly valorized means to acquiring rhetorical skill. She recalls that growing up, she “learned from TV characters that were good role models” (Different 352), and later “learned about diplomacy by reading about international negotiations and using them as models” (Developing 30). She again instructs individuals on the spectrum to do as she has done: “Observe others,” read, and “[l]earn as much about diplomacy as you can,” ideally before entering the world of work (30). As did the ancients, Grandin would seem to believe that “a close study of the model” will lead to an “internalization of structures,” which in turn eventuates in rhetorical facility and agency (Corbett 245, 250).

Simone, too, offers clear instruction in rhetoric and occasionally uses rhetorical terms. For example, warning workers with AS that their “rigid adherence” to ritual and routine may cause them to “appear stubborn and rude,” (67) she recommends that if they must “stand [their] ground” about a workplace issue, they “work on [their] style of delivery” (68). Moreover, like Grandin, even when Simone does not use rhetoric terms per se, the guidance she provides is often fundamentally rhetorical, such as her advice within a chapter devoted to “bluntness” and “Asperger’s arrogance” that employees with AS “[c]urb [their] urge to inform unless [they] are being asked for advice or information” (21). Simone clarifies that “[t]here are some jobs where it is more favorable and appropriate to impart or exchange ideas,” but, in general, she cautions that sharing unsolicited information “can rub others the wrong way” (21–22). Simone offers even more explicit instruction in rhetoric, though—containing aids to invention and delivery—when she elaborates on how to preempt being received by co-worker audiences as blunt:

The quickest way to get your point across (to non spectrum people) is not always to say it directly. It is sometimes more expedient to be indirect, or gentle. I have a visual metaphor that I find effective. If you shoot your words like an arrow (directness) at their recipient, that person will likely recoil from them. If you gift wrap your words (tact), the recipient will be more likely to want to accept your package (the point you want to make) and take it in. (21; emphases original)

As these instructional examples from Grandin and Simone indicate, rhetoric in the guidebooks is what it always is: the “manipulation of [one’s] medium with a view
to ensuring [one’s] message as favorable a reception as possible on the part of the particular audience being addressed,” to use Thomas Cole’s oft-quoted definition (ix). And rhetoric is something else within the workplace guides that it, arguably, always is: the manipulation of subjectivity itself with a view to ensuring its normative, proprietous (“diplomatic”; “tactful”) construction and reception.

Some scholars working in rhetoric and disability studies have suggested that rhetoric indeed may be inherently normative to the extent that it always aspires to produce the “good man” capable of “speaking well” in public forums (for example, Brueggemann, “Deafness” and “Delivering”; Lewiecki-Wilson; Johnson). In “Delivering Disability, Willing Speech,” for instance, Brenda Jo Brueggemann makes the provocative claims that “rhetoric is always concerned with propriety, with ‘taste,’ with prescription” (21); that, throughout “its more than twenty-five hundred year history,” not only has rhetoric “never been particularly friendly” to any of “the ‘less than perfect’ in voice, expression, or stance,” but that we may detect in that history the ways rhetoric has been “a practice, if not also a theory, of habilitation and rehabilitation” (18). Bissonnette’s Workplace Survival Guide shares in this age-old (re)habilitative objective: “In a workplace dominated by neurotypicals,” Bissonnette writes, and, again, until that day when neurodiversity is accepted, employees with AS must “[l]earn how to communicate well enough to get along with co-workers” (16; emphasis original). Toward this end of producing the “good worker speaking well enough,” the Workplace Survival Guide presents, in the “A Primer on Communication” chapter, lessons in the “basics” of “how neurotypicals communicate” (21), and, in various later chapters, more detailed recommendations for effective workplace communication. Because Bissonnette is the most invested and most expert of the authors in my sample in incorporating what we can discern as rhetorical training and terminology into her workplace advice (interesting, given that she is the most invested in norming), I concentrate on the nature of that advice in what follows. Rhetoric for this career coach continues to serve a largely normative function despite some very promising aspects of its invocation and application.

“Think audience and context”

Among the first basics of neurotypical communication Bissonnette introduces in the primer is that “[neurotypicals] assume that you will figure out motives without being told, and know what is expected, based on inferences and previous experiences” (Asperger’s 23). Though Bissonnette uses terminology from linguistics (for example, “pragmatics”; “paralanguage”) as she expands on this basic point, the first lesson she is teaching here is rhetoric’s first lesson par excellence: that “meaning comes from context” (22), both the social-situational and extra-verbal contexts of an utterance, such as body language and intonation (26). She follows with brief examples of what
attunement to each type of context would entail—“speaking to the president of the company in a more formal way than you speak to your peers; adjusting the content of a presentation based on what your audience already knows, or needs to know, about a topic; noticing when people are bored,” tense, or angry (22)—and stresses that “try[ing] to heighten” context awareness is particularly crucial to workplace success (25).

In offering “meaning comes from context” as the preeminent (rhetorical) lesson for workplace survival, Bissonnette is working overtly not from rhetorical theory (or linguistics)—again, her invocations of rhetoric are tacit—but from the clinical theory that autism involves “context blindness” (Vermeulen). In so doing, she seems also to be working from and perpetuating a common (neurotypical) construction, one that Melanie Yergeau has said she “fear[s] most”: that “of the autist as an inherently arhetorical being” (Heilker and Yergeau 494). A continuing explication of Bissonnette’s recommendations for workplace communication, however, reveals that this is not an entirely accurate reading of her stance. It is more precise to say that Bissonnette finds that employees with AS are not yet rhetorical beings, but that this is exactly what they must (and thus can) become to ensure workplace survival, master that elusive process of fitting in, and thereby achieve full workplace citizenship and worker subjectivity.

“Developing [communication] skills is not about creating scripts,” Bissonnette writes, still in the primer. “Scripts can be useful,” she clarifies (and she supplies many), “for introducing yourself” or for other routine workplace conversations, but “they are insufficient for managing the complexity of human interaction in the workplace” (Asperger’s 21). It is simply “not possible,” Bissonnette perseveres, “to anticipate and prepare a specific response” for communicative events of one single workday, let alone a career (21). To put Bissonnette’s rhetorical instruction into expressly rhetorical terms, she is insisting that imitation (or memory) and delivery, to which we’ve seen references by Grandin and Simone already, are not enough; workers with AS must come into complete rhetorical being, capable of both invention and kairotic responsiveness. To cultivate these capacities for rhetorical invention and response, Bissonnette does what most teachers of rhetoric would do: she primes her pupils with a bit of discipline, redressing (or rehabilitating) their “innate” defects and readying them for pedagogical intervention, and then she provides heuristics.

As the notion of autism as context blindness (or mindblindness) implies, autism is widely understood to include deficits in making inferences. In a sense, then, autism is widely portrayed as a hermeneutic deficiency, a portrayal Bissonnette seems to embrace (and reinscribe) and a deficiency she seeks to ameliorate (or maybe banish). “If you are often angered, offended or hurt by others,” Bissonnette advises in a chapter on “people skills,” “the problem is likely to be that you are [. . .] misinterpreting the situation. Think about working with a professional on how to become more objective
and accurate in the way you interpret events” (Asperger’s 78; emphases added). Though the appeal to objectivity is intriguing considering Bissonnette’s view that “meaning comes from context,” the point I wish to advance here is that this type of blaming statement and others like it—such as “my clients have trouble meeting expectations because they do not fully listen to instructions” (49; emphasis added)—constitute pedagogical acts of norming and assimilation meant to clear the way for “proper” interpretation.

To be fair to Bissonnette, these directives to essentially get your mind right and pay attention are not as devoid of context as I have made them appear. Rather, as she says early in the Workplace Survival Guide—and this time consistently with her theory that meaning is contextual—Bissonnette “believe[s] that it is easier to learn from examples,” so she includes many from her client cases throughout the book (16). Usually serving as negative models of her clients’ inaccurate interpretations, or of their poor listening that would result in the same, these plentiful anecdotes are then generally followed by neurotypical interpretations or reactions designed to show an alternative (better or correct) response to the workplace scenario or interpersonal interaction being narrated. The neurotypical perspectives sometimes seem synonymous with what Bissonnette deems “an objective review of the facts” (105), and at times exemplify “big picture” thinking, or the “group orientation” that Bissonnette says drives all office politics (23, 78). Regardless, the workplace examples and counterexamples can be understood to serve a heuristic function themselves, as their chief purpose is to dislodge readers’ minds from habituated ways of thinking so that they may not only interpret workplace and rhetorical situations anew but, eventually, discover and initiate new rhetorical approaches to those situations.

Often, though, Bissonnette uses heuristic procedures that are even more obvious as such. As with Grandin’s and Simone’s instruction earlier, the heuristics Bissonnette provides are largely audience based, and readers will find the most concentrated collection of these within a subsection of the chapter “Executive Functions at Work” titled “Getting to the Point: Right-Sizing Communications.” I move through selected heuristics quickly, both because they are so recognizable and because their specific content (or our speculations about the pedagogical soundness of their progression or any other qualities) is of less significance to my coming argument than their overarching aim, which (again) is to help employees with AS “[t]hink audience and context” so that they may invent and execute effective, appropriate workplace communication (Asperger’s 101). In pursuit of that aim, then, Bissonnette supplies the following familiar prompts and guiding questions as aids to invention, arrangement, and style for speaking and writing occasions alike: “Plan your message” (100); “Prepare an outline with key points” (100); “Challenge yourself to communicate the main points using 25 words or less” (101); “Before you include a detail, complete
this sentence: “This is important to my audience because . . .” (101); “Are you communicating with subordinates, peers, a supervisor, senior management, or outside parties [. . .]? What do they already know about the situation? What do they need to know now?” (101); “Avoid ‘$20 words,’” as these can “intimidate others” (102); “Edit your written communication” (which she notes is made easier by setting it aside and then reading it aloud) (102); and, of course, “Choose the right medium for your message”—email, for example, Bissonnette warns, may be overwhelming to busy people and is inappropriate for complex or sensitive situations (103). Finally, in order to enhance employees’ abilities to invent “right-sized,” audience-aware spoken and written workplace communications, Bissonnette furnishes further, and also familiar, heuristics in perspective taking, telling employees to experiment with “grayscale thinking,” which allows for both/and points of view, and to “practice the debater’s trick of arguing the opposing view”: “Take an idea that you disagree with and then find the merit in it,” Bissonnette advises (106).

I have intimated that what is most significant about these prompts and heuristics is their nearly singular focus on audience appeal, an assertion I make because, in this focus, the Workplace Survival Guide’s pedagogy flies in the face of Yergeau’s aforementioned most feared but pervasive “construction of the autist as an inherently arhetorical being” (Heilker and Yergeau 494), and flies in the face of what has usually been deemed impossible. As Paul Heilker and Melanie Yergeau explain with some consternation, “[P]sychologists and rhetoricians alike suggest that autistics cannot imagine or acknowledge the mental states of others, that autistics cannot emotionally or rhetorically reciprocate, that autistics cannot gauge the needs and expectations of an audience,” and thus that autistics cannot, in short, “write or read in a rhetorically effective manner” (491). Indeed, well-known English studies scholar Anne Jurecic has forwarded such opinions in the pages of this journal. In 2007’s “Neurodiversity,” an article that precipitated several concerned responses from disabilities studies scholars (see especially Lewiecki-Wilson and Dolmage; see also Heilker), Jurecic worries that rhetoric and writing pedagogies may meet their “limit case” (432) when encountering autistic students because spectrum neurology itself may not merely “hinder the ability to write for an audience” (425) but preempt the capacity “to imagine the minds of others” (432) or “the difference of another perspective” (426; see also “Mindblindness” 19).

Bissonnette wants no part of such limits. As we have seen, hers is a rhetorical pedagogy geared—as are all rhetorical pedagogies—to fostering the understanding of other perspectives; fostering the understanding of, and the ability to appeal to and meet, audience expectations and needs; fostering the understanding of, and the facility to work within, the affordances and restrictions of situational context. And hers is a teacher’s (or coach’s) faith that, “with practice,” as she says repeatedly throughout the Workplace Survival Guide, all of this perspective-shifting audience
and context awareness is possible for employees and, by extension, other individuals with autism to achieve.

In a sense, Bissonnette’s faith is unsurprising, even as it is refreshing. She would not have a lucrative career-coaching business nor be a successful author of multiple career advice books if she did not promote the view that employees with AS can be coached, trained, or taught. Moreover, her confidence that workers with AS can learn responsiveness to audience and context arises directly, if counterintuitively, from the theory of autism as context blindness to which she subscribes, and which posits that although individuals with autism are not (and cannot become) spontaneously sensitive to context, they can come to consider and even attune to context via intellectual, rational, conscious means (Bissonnette, Asperger’s 20, 23; Vermeulen). With that premise in mind, it is also not surprising, though it is affirming, that Bissonnette finds what we readily recognize as some of rhetoric and writing pedagogy’s most traditional heuristics well suited to cultivating context awareness. By definition, after all, heuristics are “consciously directed” aids to learning or discovery; problem-solving procedures “carried out deliberately and rationally” precisely because the learner does not (yet) have “a habitual way of thinking,” an intuitive sense or “knack,” that would propel her to the same place of invention (Young 345).

Yet, although Bissonnette’s faith in the learning and rhetorical capacities of autistic workers is refreshing, and although her implicit faith in traditional rhetorical aids to invention is as well, this faith in rhetoric, as I’ve stated repeatedly, is only implicit. Next, I explore the implications of Bissonnette’s (and, to a lesser extent, the other career advice authors’) unreflexive application and invocation of rhetoric, as well as implications of the normative uses to which rhetoric is put in the guidebooks. I then offer some conclusions about how we might respond to the rhetorical-cultural work the guidebooks do and to the larger cultural forces this work represents.

Rhetoricity Revised; Rhetoricity Retrenched

It is actually quite remarkable that, without once using the term heuristic, or rhetoric, or directly citing or otherwise evidencing any overt familiarity with rhetorical theory or writing pedagogy, Bissonnette seems (again, implicitly) to come to the same conclusion Heilker has in his suggestion that “common pedagogical practices” of rhetoric and writing studies may be not only sufficient but ideal for helping autistic writers and rhetors, whose challenges are “not different in kind” from anyone else’s (319). That is, though others in the field such as Jurecic, and also Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson and Jay Dolmage, have indicated we may need to radically revise or invent new pedagogical practices to teach autistic writers and rhetors, Heilker reminds us that we have many theoretical and pedagogical resources already for addressing
autistic students’ most intractable problems, which, “simply put,” amount to “fundamental difficulties in invoking and addressing their audiences” (320). Imagine, then, if Bissonnette—or the other, or future authors of career advice guides for autistic individuals—were directly informed by and drawing from these, “our” resources.

Though I wrote in the previous section that I wanted to refrain for the moment, and for the purposes of the argument then in progress, from evaluating the specifics of Bissonnette’s use of heuristics, if I were to proffer evaluative commentary now, I might comment on such qualities as their ordering, for example. Most of us with any understanding of writing or rhetoric, it is fair to say, would not end a three-page-long list of heuristics with a prompt to “choose the right medium for your message,” as Bissonnette does, because we would be aware that questions of medium or genre need to be addressed in and as part of invention. Similarly, I doubt that many of us with backgrounds in writing or rhetoric would place heuristics for perspective taking in a section that follows heuristics for appealing to audience, as Bissonnette does, because we would likely believe that one must become practiced in imagining different perspective before one can, and in order to, appeal to an audience.

Further, and to my mind more important than these practical, pedagogical considerations, a familiarity with the theories of rhetoric and writing studies could acquaint authors of career advice for autistic adults with theories, such as Heilker and Yergeau’s, that autism is its own “way of being in the world through language” (487) that “autistics are minority rhetors” (487) and that there may exist such entities as “autistic discourse conventions” (489). Bissonnette comes close to evincing such an awareness by honoring that neurotypical communicative and social conventions will be utterly confusing and seem foreign to “Aspergians” (for example, Asperger’s 23, 74), but, as we have seen, mystifying or no, Bissonnette’s dedication is to “the maintenance of the norm, at all costs”—exactly the attitude that Lewiecki-Wilson and Dolmage say those in rhetoric and writing studies (and anyone concerned with neurological difference) must contest (318).

Whether rhetoric itself is inherently normative is surely debatable, but there is no doubt it is normative and normalizing within the employment and workplace guides, as is pedagogy in general. In fact, to reorient to the first portion of my argument regarding the guidebooks’ reinvention and marketing of the autistic worker as a fantasy employee in possession of qualities valued most by contemporary workplaces, we might bear in mind that teachability is itself a desirable quality in workers. The guidebooks’ presentation of autistic employees as teachable, trainable, remediable can thus be construed as a further effort at normalizing them, and is likely comforting in the extreme to the secondary audience of prospective employers. That said, some sympathy for the guidebooks’ normalizing and normative missions is in order: beyond gender and race, there may be no more significant dual markers of subjectivity than
communication skills and the ability to work (Lewiecki-Wilson 159), with the former being crucial to, often determinative of, the latter. In short, the guidebook authors’ normative agenda can be read as (an effort at) an empowering agenda.

Again, though, the very real pressures of and to standard communication are pressures rhetoric and writing studies could help authors of career advice for autistic adults to negotiate, given what Heilker and Yergeau characterize as our field’s “substantial collective wisdom” helping “minority populations [. . .] to both appropriate the language of wider communication and to maintain the language of their home cultures and identities” (495). At the least, our collective wisdom and the field’s four decades of debates around issues of language rights could possibly influence the career advice authors toward more nuanced statements, reflective of more nuanced ideologies about language and identity, than the books’ current shared message to autistic employees, articulated and reiterated most forcefully by Bissonnette, that until change comes to workplaces, “the burden is on you to fit in” (Asperger’s 189).

Though laudatory of our field’s experience and successes assisting minority populations in navigating discourse-power dynamics, Heilker and Yergeau caution that “it remains to be seen” whether the “archly constructed discursive spaces of higher education” will permit autistic writers and speakers, too, “to exercise their right to their own language” (495). It is more to this essay’s point, however, to observe and remind us that there remain more “archly constructed” discursive spaces—such as those of the workplaces and corporate culture represented by the guidebooks—and more archly administered pedagogies—such as those contained in and delivered by the guidebooks—than those of academe. And so, while our field may be invested in such notions as “rhetorical accommodation” (Johnson 476), or a “revised” and “expanded understanding of rhetoricity” (Lewiecki-Wilson 157); while we may be committed to approaching language differences with respect, sensitivity, and pedagogical inventiveness geared to facilitating access to languages of power while valuing languages of culture or nature, we need to be aware that pedagogies far more public and powerful than those of writing studies, or of higher education at large (the workplace and employment guides again attest), conspire to ensure that neurotypical and other monolithic norms of language and selfhood are sustained.

**Conclusions and Possibilities**

The cultural revelation that autistic children grow up is a welcome one, and the explosion of employment and workplace guides for adults with HFA is warranted by more than market (or marketing) forces. These texts respond to and serve a legitimate, pressing need in helping a population excluded or potentially excluded from the world of work attain and maintain paid, pleasurable employment, which is a marker of both identity and full citizenship in this country. Yet, like all texts, the
guidebooks analyzed here signify beyond their declared (or best) intentions; like all pedagogical endeavors, they do much regressive, normalizing, assimilatory work in the name of empowerment; like all rhetorics, they have effects independent of motives and motives of which they are unaware.

How, then, might we react to the workplace and employment guidebooks’ efforts, which I would deem highly successful, to constitute ideal and normalize real worker subjects? How might we counter the risks of rhetoricity’s retrenchment described earlier? We might read this essay’s argument as another call, gestured to by Walters in my introduction, to conduct studies of the transition of autistic students and others with disabilities to the workplace, or to conduct more studies like this one of representations of the workplace. Indeed, the larger genre of workplace and employment guides may prove a fecund site for further inquiry toward the latter end: Amazon lists nearly 20,000 results for books on employment and career, many targeting no population in particular, but others that are field specific (for example, career advice for English or other liberal arts majors) or, like the guidebooks of this study, that target groups of people marginalized within the workplace and larger culture (for example, people over fifty, women, African Americans).

Or, we might read this essay’s argument as another call for teacher-scholars in rhetoric and writing studies to do a better job exporting our own pedagogies, or establishing greater authority over and more widely disseminating discussions of language difference and language rights. We might read it as another call for us to engage in more public forms of writing—so that we may count ourselves among the authors of employment and workplace guides for autistic (or other) adults, for example. Or, we could read the essay as simply another call to continue to “pay attention to the kinds of language used to describe neurological difference” (Jack and Appelbaum 424), or as a reiteration of Heilker’s and Yergeau’s call, with which I began, to continue to pursue rhetorical analyses of these myriad and shifting languages and of all public texts about autism. Any of these interpretations would be justified, and any of these actions responsive to context and to manifold imperfections marked by urgency.

Notes

1. See Stevenson, Harp, and Gernsbacher’s “Infantilizing Autism” for a concise review of the long, “sordid history” and continued cross-cultural practices of “[m]anufacturing pity through depictions of disabled children” and of treating disabled adults as childlike and thus “deserving [of] fewer rights.”

2. Some of this work, especially that by Margaret Price, asks more generally how the classroom presence of students with various kinds of mental disabilities challenges writing teachers to revise curricula and pedagogy.

3. Previously considered a form of, or synonymous with, high-functioning autism, Asperger’s, along with all other subcategories of the autism spectrum, was eliminated from the 2013 Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders, DSM-5, in favor of a single, umbrella classification, autism spectrum disorder. The guidebooks in my study, all of which include Asperger’s in their titles, were written
slightly before the DSM revisions, though it is worth noting that many individuals wish to retain their previous Asperger’s diagnosis and identity. I say more about the terms Asperger’s and high-functioning, and problems attending both, in the essay’s next section.

4. This type of recovery work is entirely common (though not thereby unproblematic), and not only with regard to autism. Emily Martin, for example, has chronicled the same practices of retrospectively diagnosing and crediting creative contributions to the “manic depression” of many “famous and influential people” (22, 204). Though the impetus for such reclamation efforts is understandable, diagnosing the dead is difficult. Equally misguided is retrospectively categorizing people within or according to what are very specifically contemporary cultural constructs of the spectrum, autism, bipolar disorder, and so on.

5. Walters focuses on the United States–based company Aspiritech, the Danish company Specialisterne, and the Japanese company Kaen, all of which, she writes, “purport to draw on the abilities of people with autism and to provide an accommodating work environment for them.”

6. The middle-class, professional, corporate bias of the employment and workplace guides studied here should be and will remain clear, and Grandin is, in a sense, comparatively least guilty of it among the authors. Stanford and Bissonnette really only address business professionals, and Simone actively disparages working-class jobs (“mundane positions”) as too intellectually unstimulating for those on the spectrum (21). Grandin and Duffy at least include within Developing Talents’ various lists of ideal jobs for people on the spectrum working-class jobs such as auto mechanic, plumber, HVAC technician, welder, bank teller, and so on. Of the fourteen stories of achievement compiled for Different . . . Not Less, however, only one is the story of a person in a working-class position.

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