

# Overlapping Identities: Gender Diversity among Autistic Adults



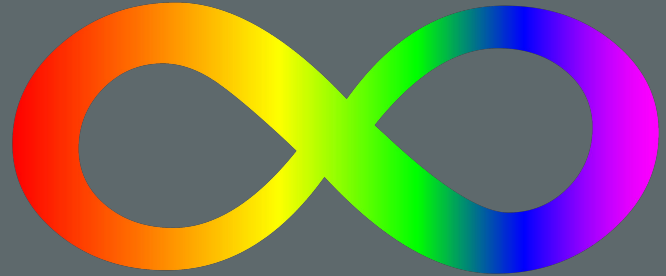
Joelle Tori Maslak  
(She/Her/Hers)

Transforming Gender Conference 2019

# Who is Joelle?

- Pronouns - She/Her/Hers
- Profession - Computer Professional
- Involved in the autistic advocacy community for 20+ years
- Community partner @ AASPIRE (Academic Autism Spectrum Partnership in Research and Education)
- One of the first adults to write online about her experiences as an autistic person - referenced in several books and articles
- Known for being outspoken in autistic community for advocating for the needs of trans people

You cannot interact with the  
*autistic* community or the  
*transgender* community without  
interacting with both.



JOKE

Not all  
(Autistics|Trans People)  
Are Software Engineers.

Some of us are hardware  
engineers.

# Access Notes for this Talk

- “Autistic”, not “person with autism”
- “Neurotypical” is a person without autism or other neurological difference
- Avoid clapping, think about how the deaf community may do applause
- Using your phone is okay, but please do so silently
- Please save questions to the end or ask with the link above
- If you're more comfortable standing to the side/back, sitting on the floor, etc, please do!

# What is Autism? One view.

The central features of Autistic Disorder are the presence of markedly abnormal or impaired development in social interaction and communication, and a markedly restricted repertoire of activity and interest. The manifestations of this disorder vary greatly depending on the developmental level and chronological age of the individual. Autistic Disorder is sometimes referred to as Early Infantile Autism, Childhood Autism, or Kanner's Autism

Source: DSM-IV



# What is Autism? A View from the Inside.

- Different sensory experiences
- Non-standard ways of learning and approaching problem solving
- Deeply focused thinking and passionate interests in specific subjects
- Atypical, sometimes repetitive, movement
- Need for consistency, routine, and order
- Difficulties in understanding and expressing language as used in typical communication, both verbal and non-verbal
- Difficulties in understanding and expressing typical social interaction

Source: ASAN (Autistic Self Advocacy Network) Website

# Addressing Autism Misconceptions

- Autistic adults don't look like autistic kids!
- It is *not* an empathy deficit
- It is *not* “thinking in pictures”
- It is *not* savant syndrome
- It is *not* being prone to meltdowns
- It is *not* a male brain
- Autistics have the full range of intelligence
- Autistics can be very fluent with spoken or written language
- Autistics may live in their own homes without formal support services
- Autistics can and do form deep, meaningful relationships
- Autistics may be “successful,” whatever that means

**Not part of autism - but a reality**

**Social  
discrimination.**

I also ask you to look at things differently...

Financial crash of 2008:

98% of banking leaders were  
non-autistic.

# Connections

# 7.8%

Dutch study - Prevalence of autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) among children seeking treatment for Gender Identity Disorder.

Vries, et. al. "Autism Spectrum Disorders in Gender Dysphoric Children & Adolescents." Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, August 2010.

# 2 of 25

Dutch study - Prevalence of autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) among children seeking treatment for Gender Identity Disorder.

Vries, et. al. "Autism Spectrum Disorders in Gender Dysphoric Children & Adolescents." Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, August 2010.

# 5.4%

The other way around - Prevalence of gender variance in diagnosed autistic children  
(reported by parents)

Equal among children assigned male at birth and children assigned female at birth.

Strang. "Increased Gender Variance in Autism Spectrum Disorders and Attention  
Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder." [Archives of Sexual Behavior](#), November 2014.



# 1 in 18

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Equal among children assigned male at birth and children assigned female at birth.

Strang. "Increased Gender Variance in Autism Spectrum Disorders and Attention  
Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder." [Archives of Sexual Behavior](#), November 2014.

**BUT...**

# Issues in these studies

- Not every trans/non-binary person will show up at a gender clinic
- Not everyone who shows up at a gender clinic will receive a formal diagnosis
- Everyone defines transgender differently making comparisons difficult
- These studies rely *a lot* on reports from parents, directly or indirectly
- Studies focused on children, not all trans people look trans at young age
- Even young children can “mask” their true gender
- We know autistic girls are under-represented in diagnosis

The true numbers may be a lot **BIGGER.**

# How to Build an Inclusive Space for More Autistics

# Sensory - General

- Distinction between **REGISTRATION** and **SENSITIVITY**
- It's not misbehavior when someone isn't bothered until they notice it!
- We have more than 5 senses.
  - Proprioception
  - "Are you hungry?"
  - "Are you tired?"
  - "Are you sick?"
- Some people might perceive one sense as another (synesthesia)
- Some people might be unable to concentrate on one sense while paying attention to another

# Sensory - Visual

- Flickering / distracting lighting, even if you don't see it
- Avoid Fluorescents, particularly old-style light tubes
- Dim lighting is often preferable
- Don't require eye contact

# Sensory - Auditory

- Central Auditory Processing Disorder (CAPD) is common among autistics
- Avoid echo-y areas
- Quiet is preferable
- One conversation at a time
- Avoid TV/radios in the background
- Subtitles on video
- Consider CART (Computer Aided Real-time Translation)

# Example of Auditory Processing



# Sensory - Touch

- Food textures
- Some people prefer heavy pressure or weighted garments
- Clothing
  - Some people like tight clothing (compression-type)
  - Some people like loose clothing
  - Some fabrics can be irritating
- Don't touch people without permission!

# Sensory - Design of Space

- May be unaware of body in space (“clumsy”, frequently bumps into furniture)
- Provide different seating options.
  - Soft seats give different proprioceptive feedback than hard seats
  - Others may prefer sitting on the floor, standing, exercise ball, etc.
- Give space between seats (remove every other chair)
- Provide space “in the middle of the action” and space at the edges of the interaction
- Provide a place for people to go if they need to rest from some interactions or overloading situations

# Communication Signalling Badges



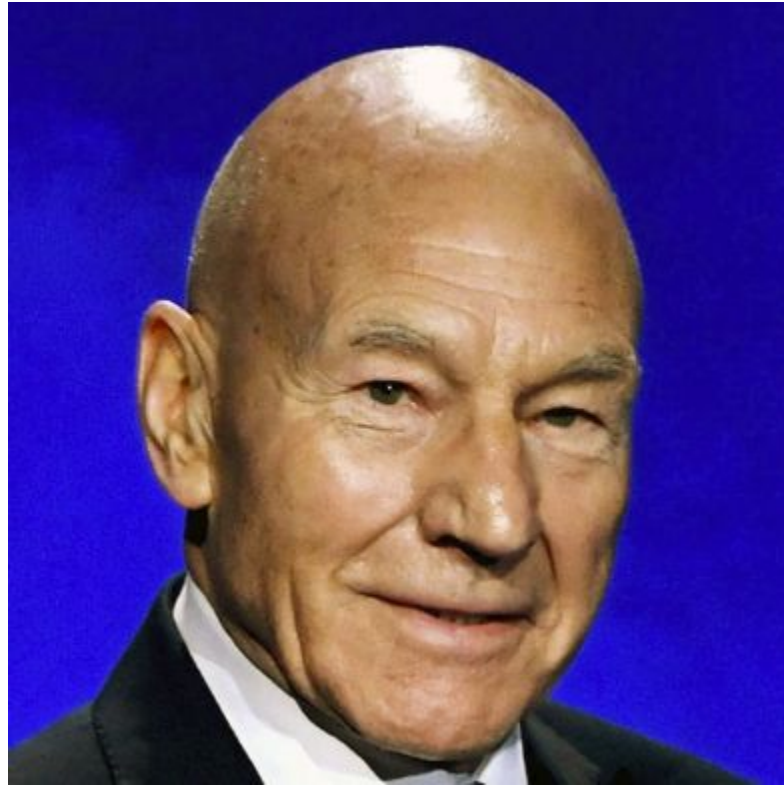
- Can be changed minute-to-minute, not fixed
- No badge - No accommodations needed
- Green - I want more people to initiate communication with me, I have problems with doing it on my own.
- Yellow - Only select people should initiate communication with me
- Red - Please don't initiate communication with me

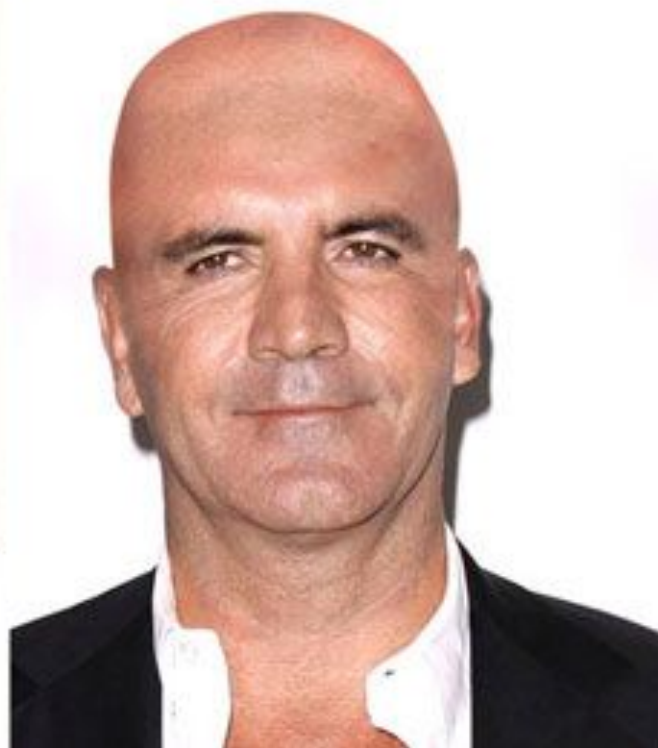
# Communication

- Using alternative forms of communication - note pad, sign language, electronic communication devices, iPad applications
- Some autistics have trouble with word finding
- Other autistics have trouble with verbal speech
- Sometimes people - even seemingly very highly verbal people - shift between speech and other forms of communication based on situation
- Emotional content can make communication difficult
- Some people have trouble initiating communication
- Give autistic people time and alternative ways of asking / seeking information
- Don't require use of a phone!

# Clear Social Rules & Interactions

- Write down the “unwritten” rules
- Clear expectations on respecting boundaries (sexual and other forms of harassment)
- How does someone meet other people at your event?
- What do you do about violations of social rules?





# Reading 1

“Too Scared to do What I Want”

True story, based on the presenter's experience. Written in 2017.



# Prospagnosia

- “Faceblindness”
- I used to be one of about 25 people known to have this
  - We know I wasn’t!
  - 1 in 50 may be the real number
  - Higher among autistics
- Name tags
- Arranged meeting spaces
- Introductions

# Schedules & Wayfinding

- Let people know what is going to happen
- What timeliness expectations do you have for them?
- Lots of directional signs!
- Reassurance signs that people are in the right place
- Clear, orderly registration process at an event
- Good website with detailed information that is kept up-to-date
- Provide to everyone pictures of the buildings, rooms, facilities, etc, so that people have additional reassurance

# Executive Functioning

- Forms that are required should be simple and clear
- Don't ask things that are not necessary to ask
- Allow us to use online resources whenever possible
- Provide visual and written materials that describe processes
- Make each step clear

# 70%

Percent of autistic adults reporting sexual victimization sometime after age 14.

(no difference compared to neurotypicals in likelihood of perpetrating abuse)

Weiss & Fardella. "Victimization and Perpetration Experience of Adults With Autism." Frontiers in Psychiatry, May 25, 2018.

# 7 of 10

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# 47%

Percent of trans adults self reporting sexual assault

Note this is not the same question as was asked in the previous slide.

2015 U.S. Transgender Survey

# 1 in 2

Percent of trans adults reporting sexual assault

Note this is not the same question as was asked in the previous slide.

2015 U.S. Transgender Survey

# Abuse

- Do you have policies covering abuse?
- Does your process of investigation re-victimize?
- Does your process of investigation favor neurotypical communication?
- Autistic women and trans people are frequent recipients of unwanted sexual advances in community spaces. What do you do to prevent this?
- How do you handle discussion of sensitive topics?
- What do you do at an event if an abuser and victim both register?



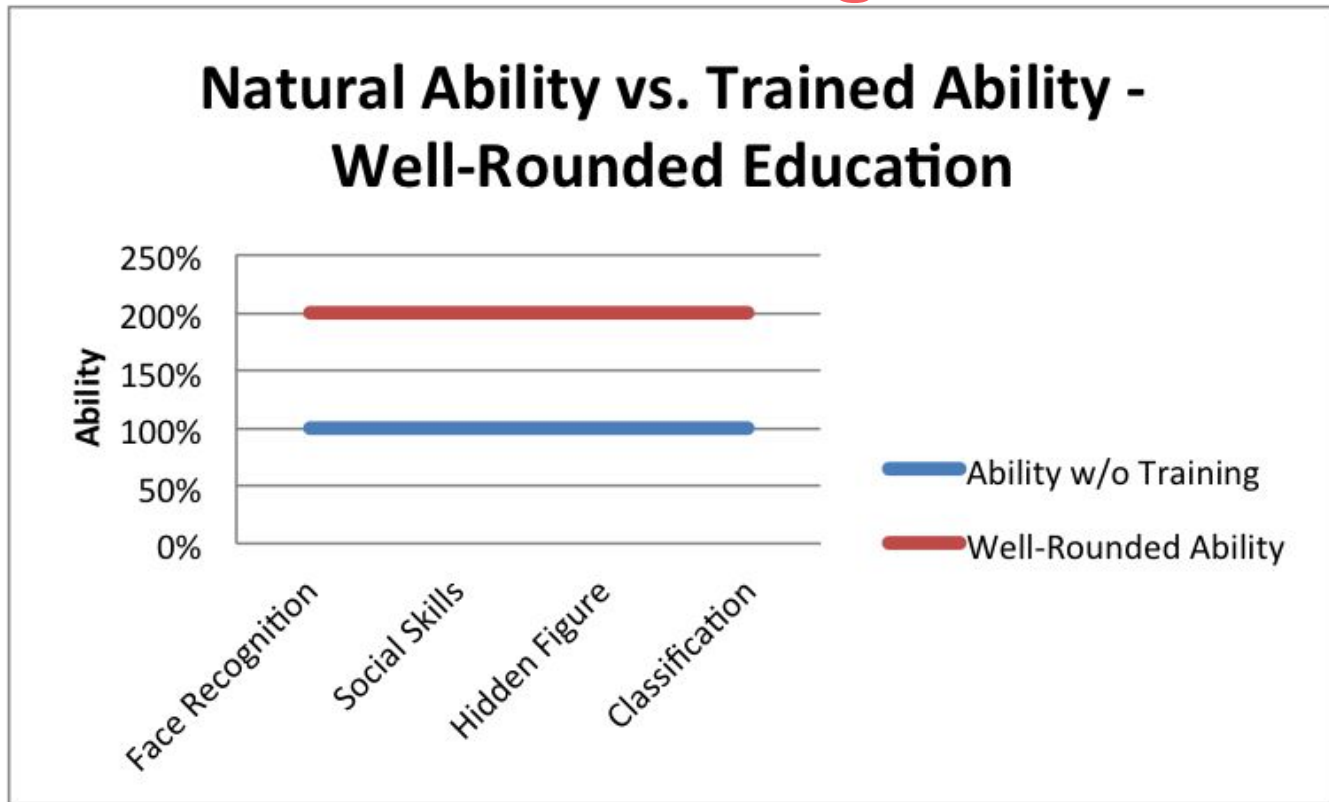
# Financial

- Many autistics lack stable employment due to discrimination or other disabilities
- Provide tiered cost structure based on ability to pay
- Provide alternative methods of payment (example: volunteering reduces cost of attending)
- Scholarships / Sponsorships
- Consider cheaper venues and accommodations
- Consider transportation costs

# Different Profiles of Strengths

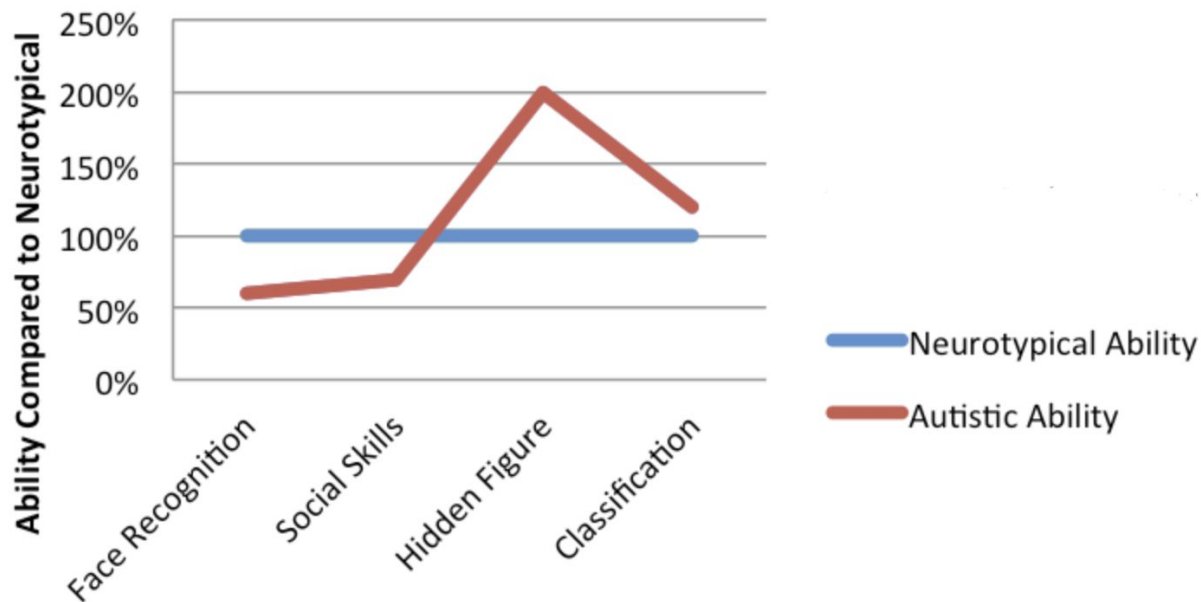
- “Well rounded” means someone fits a reasonably typical pattern of strengths
- Someone else may have just as much ability, but be way stronger and way weaker in individual areas than a neurotypical.
- Different isn't weak or a problem - unless society expects exactly the same profile of relative strengths

# Different Profiles of Strengths

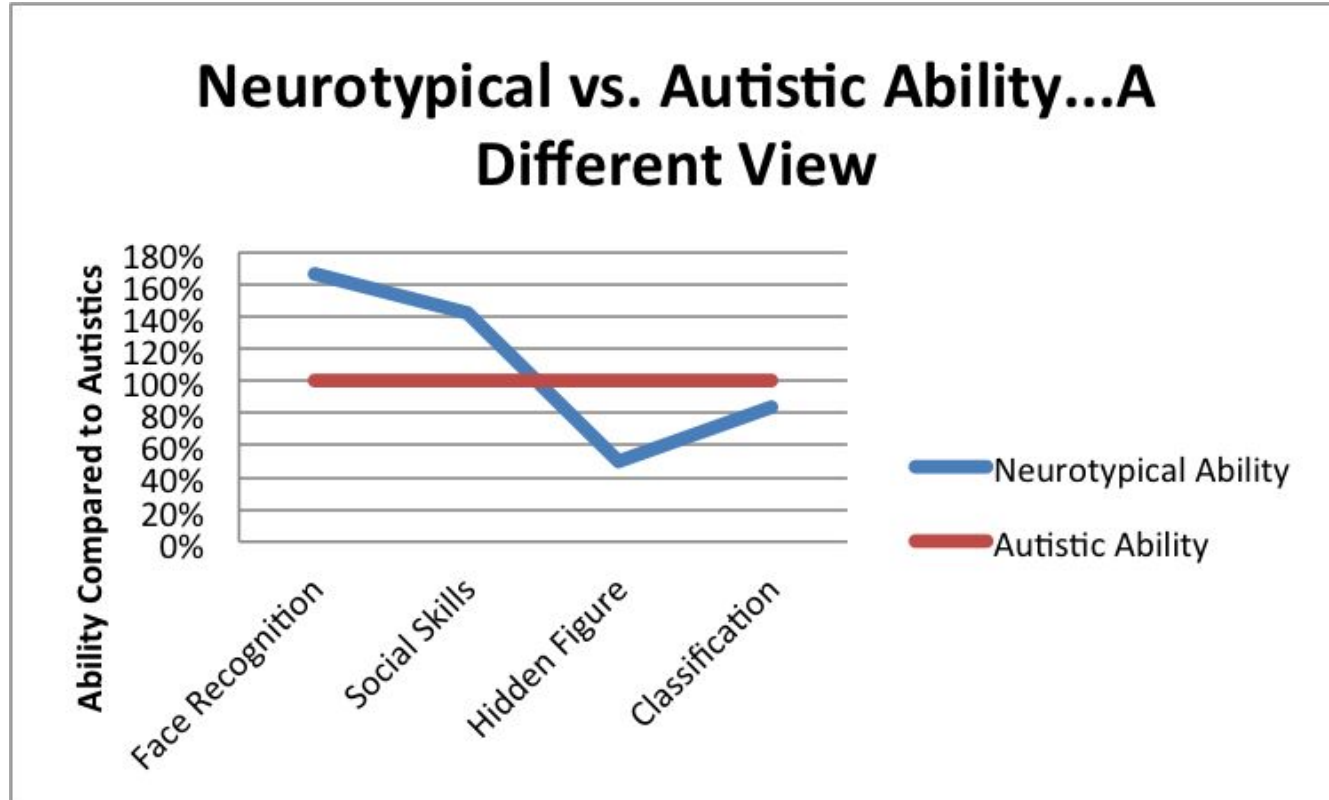


# Different Profiles of Strengths

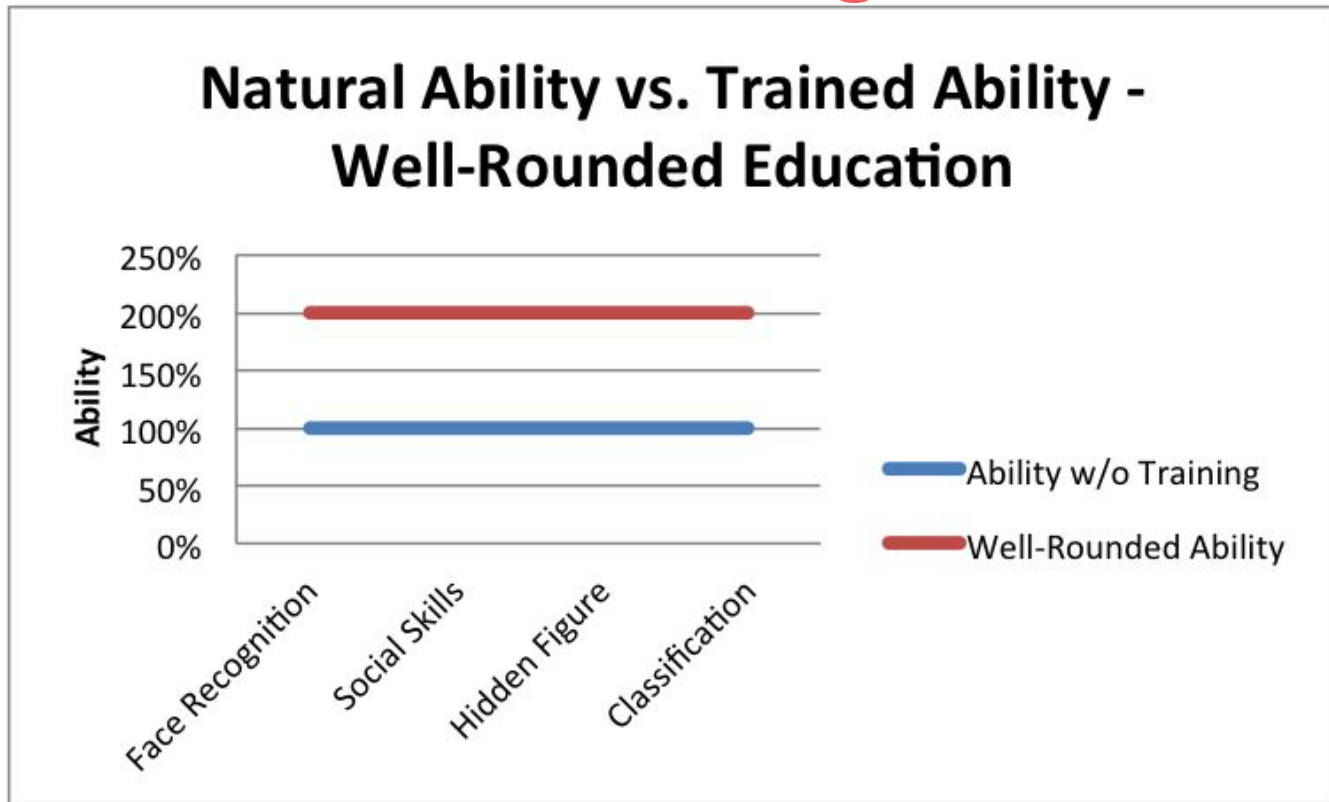
## Neurotypical vs. Autistic Ability



# Different Profiles of Strengths



# Different Profiles of Strengths



# Spoons

- Society is designed for neurotypicals
- Small things can add up and become big things
- I might be able to do X yesterday but not today
- Other things may add to the load - gender, other disability, work situation, etc.
- *BELIEVE* people when they say they are having issues.

## Reading 2

“Prompt Critical Excursions in Autistics”

By the author, 2016.



# Relationships

- Hard to initiate
- Still, we initiate
  - 55% of Autistic women asked someone out
  - 50% of Autistic men have asked someone out
  - 85% of Autistic non-binary people have asked someone out.

Source: Unpublished research by author, convenience sample

# Relationships - Unwanted Pursuit

## SELF REPORTS -

- 65% of NON-autistics (sample was mostly women)
- 15% of autistic women
- 25% of autistic men
- 0% of non-binary autistics

Source: Unpublished research by author, convenience sample

# Relationships - But...

- We may have trouble initiating relationships
- Some people might not know rules around boundaries
- Our relationships are often over-policed
- LGBT relationships of disabled people are even more policed
  - Our service providers are often religiously affiliated

# Overlap with Gender

- Are people's gender respected?
- What do you do when someone is misgendered?
- Can people pee and fully participate otherwise?
- Are autistic-aware staff & volunteers trained on transgender/NB needs?
- Do you ask for gender from people? Do you explain why, clearly?

Questions?