



University of
Sheffield



Economic
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Research Council

What You Can't Ignore

Examining Distraction in Autism

Who am I?

- Research Autism (/neurodivergence) in adulthood
 - [Distraction](#)
 - Services
 - Research about Autism Research



Who am I?

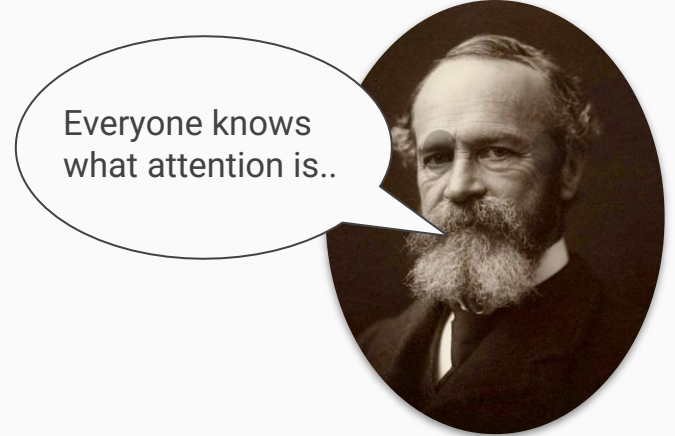
- Research Autism (/neurodivergence) in adulthood
 - Distraction
 - Services
 - Research about Autism Research
- Strive to make my research **participatory**
 - Involving autistic people



What is Distraction?

What is Distraction?

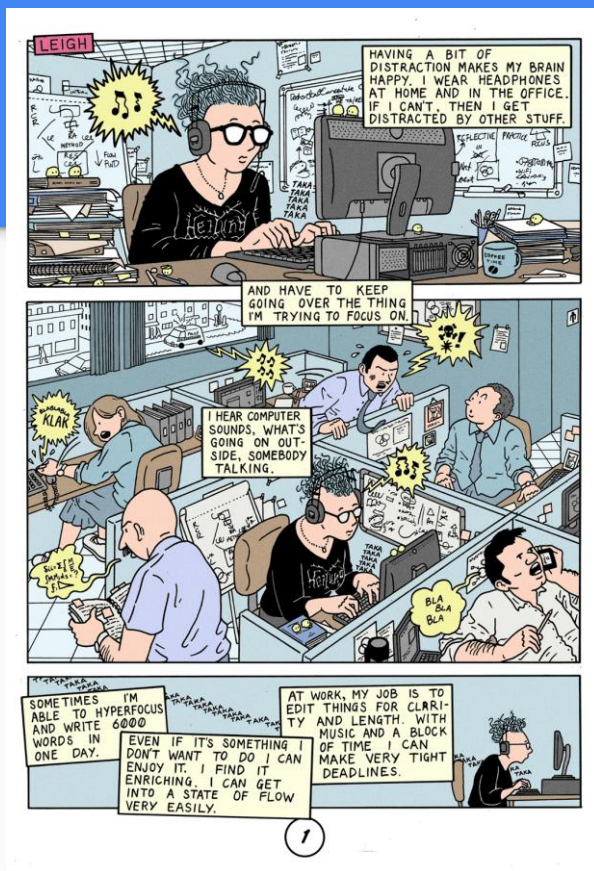
- Assumption of attention as a limited mental resource
- Distraction as task-irrelevant processing



James (1890) *Principles of Psychology*

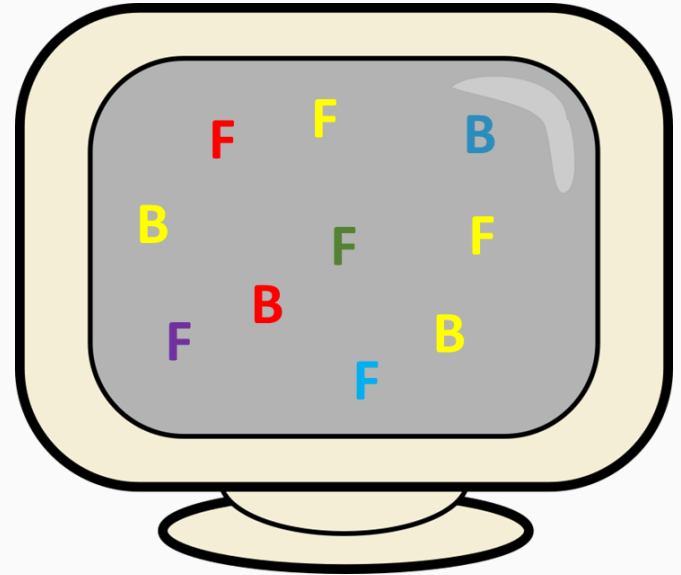
What You Can't Ignore

- Characterise distraction using different approaches
- Understand how distraction is experienced
- Contexts which shape distraction



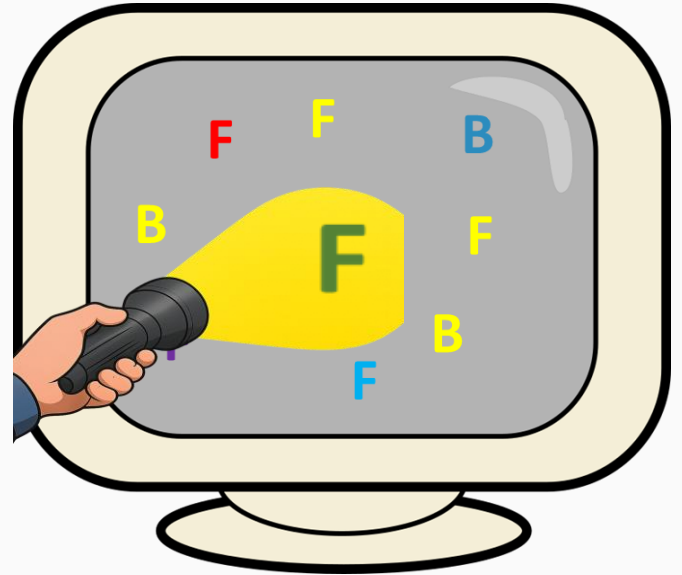
Researching Distraction

- Experiments
 - Involving fast responses to specific stimuli while ignoring others



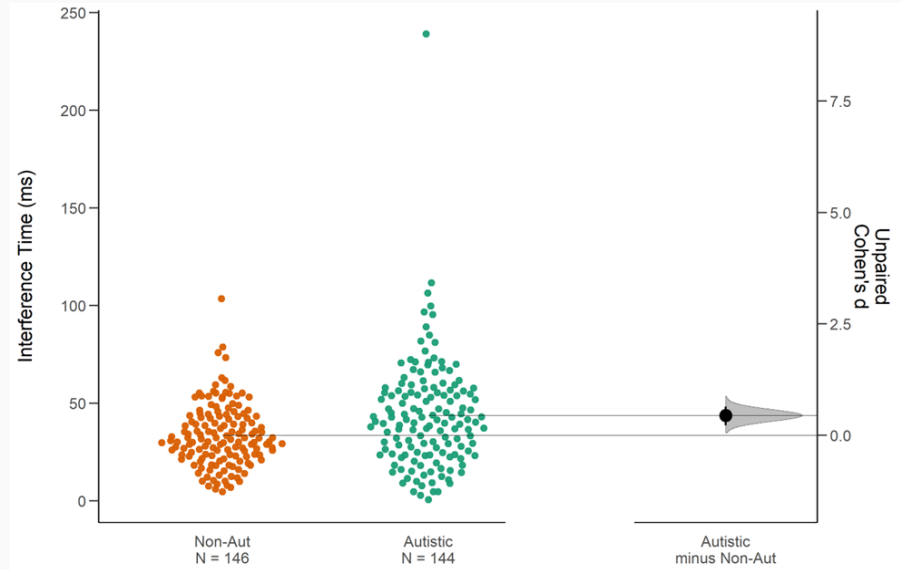
Selective Attention As A Spotlight

- What falls in the spotlight gets attentional preference
- Does the spotlight function differently for autistic people?



Selective Attention As A Spotlight

- Autistic people have **less effective spotlight** compared with non-autistic people
 - (Interference Time is a measure of interference from distractors)



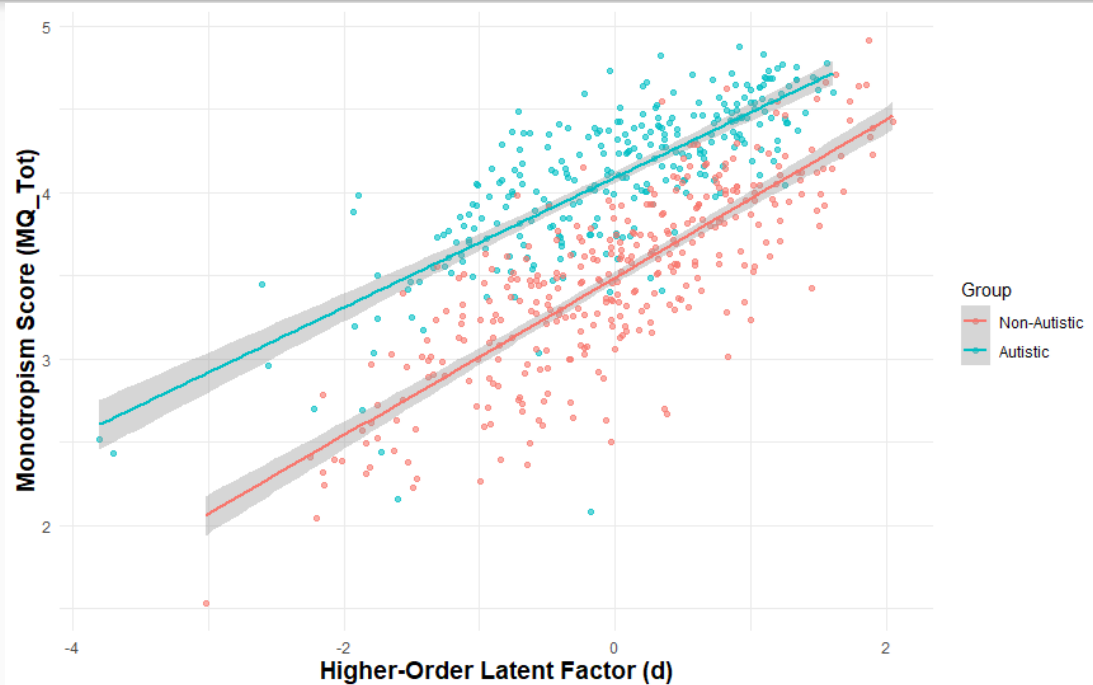
Non-Autistic Autistic

Trait Distractibility

- 12 self-report questionnaires different questionnaires to 287 autistic and 343 non-autistic people
- Trait distractibility
 - Mind Wandering
 - External Distractions
 - Unwanted Intrusive Thoughts

Trait Distractibility

- Trait Distractibility is correlated with scores on the Monotropism Scale



Phenomenology of Distraction

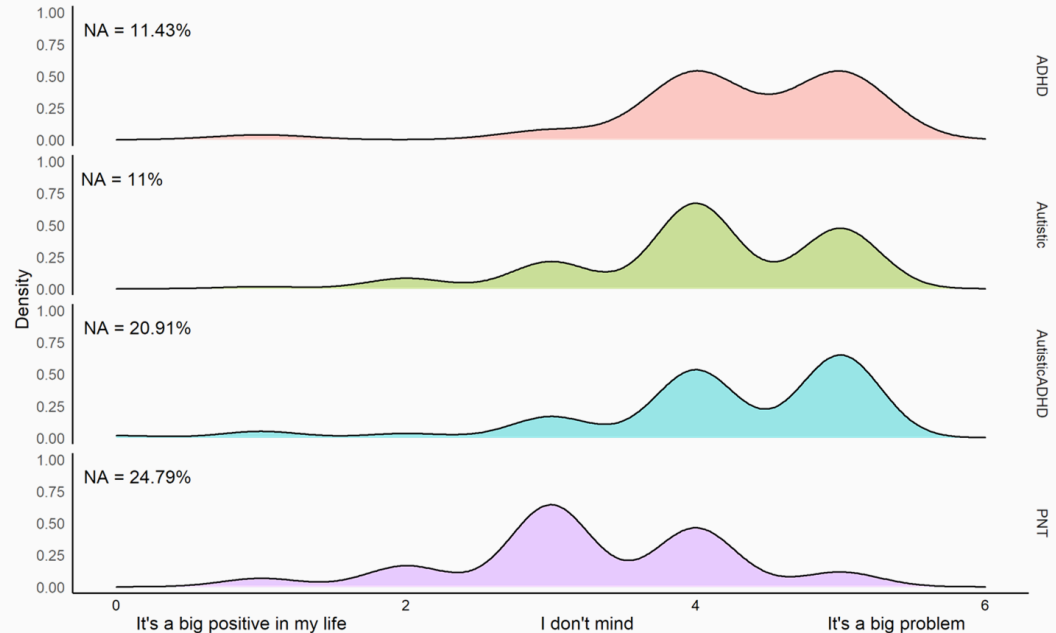
- Survey with Autistic (n = 100), ADHD (n = 35), AuDHD (n = 110) and NTs (n = 117)

How much of a problem is distraction?

- Neurodivergent people found distraction to be more of a **problem**
 - Especially those with ADHD

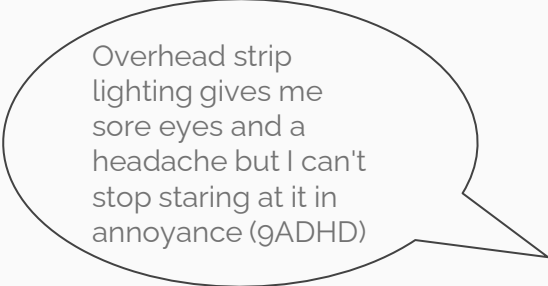
"I've never been able to work full-time because I get exhausted from all the sensory input and multiple distractions".

(278Aut)



What is Distracting?

- Sensory distractions more commonly reported for neurodivergent people
 - Visual
 - Flashing
 - Visual Movement
 - Brightness
 - Fluorescent lights
 - Smell and touch never mentioned by NTs



Overhead strip lighting gives me sore eyes and a headache but I can't stop staring at it in annoyance (gADHD)

Summary

- Evidence using a range of method that distraction is a challenge for autistic people
- Individual profiles of what is distracting but qualitatively similar across neurotypes
 - Environmental adjustments useful for all
- Role of interest in shaping distraction

What next?

- An attention environment audit
 - Primary users- neurodivergent people
 - Psychoeducation post-diagnosis



Thank you!



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Survey Study: Anna Remington, Jana Brickert, Freya Elise, Brian Irvine, Laura Crane, Gaia Scerif, Emily Farran

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